


2006

Screening the Revolution: "Williamsburg, the Story of a Patriot" as Historic Artifact, History Film, and Hegemonic Struggle

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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-5vgk-hq92>

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SCREENING THE REVOLUTION

Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot as Historic Artifact, History Film,
and Hegemonic Struggle

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

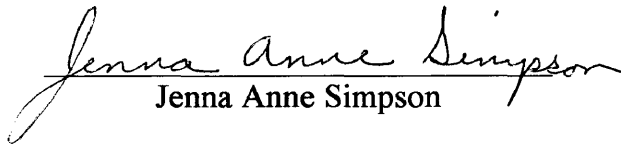
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2006

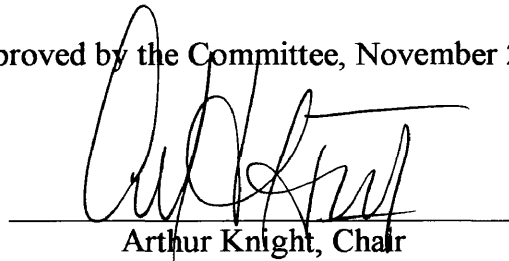
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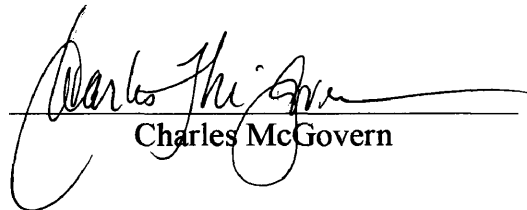
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts


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Approved by the Committee, November 2006


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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank Arthur Knight for his guidance throughout this project – his suggestions, promptings, and criticism have been invaluable to this work and to my broader thinking on history, film, and audiences. I'm also greatly indebted to Charles McGovern and Kimberly Phillips for their generous reading of this work and for the insights I've gained through their instruction.

I also must express my sincere appreciation to Richard L. McCluney, Jr., Vice President of Productions, Publications, and Learning Ventures at Colonial Williamsburg; Cary Carson, Vice President of the Research Division; and Michael Durling, Nancy Gulden, and the Media Productions staff. Without their generous gifts of time, interest, and assistance, I would never have been fully able to take on this topic.

Finally, I'd like to thank my parents, whose unwavering love and support have been the foundation of my life.

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ABSTRACT

Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot, Colonial Williamsburg's visitor orientation film, debuted in the spring of 1957. Though it was originally intended for only a few years' exhibition, it has been playing continuously ever since, making it the nation's longest-running movie. This work questions the implications of such longevity, examining *The Story of a Patriot* as a historic artifact, history film, and site of struggle over the meaning of the past.

As a historic artifact, *The Story of a Patriot* is a useful window onto the late 1950s as it reflects the attitudes within Colonial Williamsburg and in American society at the time. In both the film itself and in the documents surrounding its creation, we see struggles over communism, individualism, conformity, and race.

As the decades have passed, audiences have brought new attitudes and expectations to the film. These changes have seriously impacted the film's effect and its ability to teach history. Nevertheless, Colonial Williamsburg continues to utilize *The Story of a Patriot* in their visitor center, and several million dollars have been spent in recent years to digitally restore the film to its former "glory." The value of this movie to the current administration at Colonial Williamsburg is also evident both through its use as a fundraising device and in the similarities between the film's goals and those of the new (as of 2006) immersive educational program at Colonial Williamsburg, *Revolutionary City*.

How, then, does *The Story of a Patriot* function as a "history film" today? Is it effective? In what ways does it conform to—or refute—the elements deemed necessary by modern theorists of the "history film"? Finally, how could this film be improved, in its essentials or in its current use? In addressing these questions, this work considers *The Story of a Patriot* as a teaching aid, a reflection of the time when it was created, and a place for examining the struggle over the depiction of history on screen.

Screening the Revolution

In the spring of 1956, Hollywood came to town. For a few short weeks one small city in Virginia saw actors walk its streets as scenes from the past were reenacted before the watchful eyes of film professionals and curious onlookers. In almost any other town this surely would have been truly extraordinary, but for the locals here it was in many ways just business as usual. For the town was Williamsburg, Virginia, and the film crews were there to produce *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot*, a movie for the new visitor center being built at Colonial Williamsburg. Completed and first released in 1957, the film offered tourists an immersive lesson in the history of colonial Virginia, focusing on the importance of Williamsburg in the struggle for American independence. As a product of the mid-1950s, its depiction of eighteenth-century history in many ways reflected the concerns of Cold War America. But the story of *The Story of a Patriot* does not end there. Colonial Williamsburg has been showing that same film continually ever since its release, making it the longest-running movie in America. Over the nearly fifty years of its exhibition the film itself has changed very little; however, the circumstances affecting the presentation of the film and the attitudes of its audiences have significantly altered, seriously impacting the ability of the movie to teach about history.

The Story of a Patriot offers, then, multiple sources of light upon the relationship between film and history. As a cultural artifact, the film makes clear its origins in the social and technological milieu of 1950s America. At the same time, its subsequent history reveals changes in audience reception and the interpretation of history over time. Together, these facets of *The Story of a Patriot* can contribute to a general debate on the use of film in teaching history, bringing the ideas of those filmmakers of 1956 to bear on

questions that remain relevant in 2006 and beyond. Furthermore, consideration of *The Story of a Patriot* as product of the competing ideologies of Cold War America sheds light upon the struggles over culture and meaning during the film's production. Those same struggles have persisted into the present, influencing its continued use, presentation, and reception. *The Story of a Patriot* is a history film and a historic artifact, but it has also been, throughout its long life, a site of struggle for hegemony.

Colonial Williamsburg's 1950s Filmmaking Ideology

When the Hollywood crews descended upon Williamsburg to shoot *The Story of a Patriot*, they were certainly not the first to produce a movie in the town – nor was their production team the first to be active in Colonial Williamsburg. As the Colonial Williamsburg employee newsletter noted in 1948, the museum-city was no stranger to film crews producing travelogues, educational pieces, Hollywood films such as *The Howards of Virginia* (1940), and an “Eastman-CW film,” *Eighteenth Century Life in Williamsburg, Virginia* (1944). This last film had supposedly reached audiences of “more than 5,000,000” through a nationwide release in addition to the visitors who “crowd into the Reception Center two evenings each week to add to this impressive roster” and viewers exposed to the film through “numerous foreign-language prints” sponsored by the State Department.¹ In 1949, Colonial Williamsburg collaborated with the International Film Foundation, Inc. on their first “full-scale explanatory film,” *Williamsburg Restored*, which was released in 1951 and served as *The Story of a*

¹ “The Camera Eye,” *News From Colonial Williamsburg* 1.3 (August 1948): 8.

Patriot's immediate predecessor as an orientation film for tourists.² In the same year that *Williamsburg Restored* debuted, Colonial Williamsburg formalized its growing commitment to the production of films by creating an Audio-Visual Department, designed to incorporate "such activities as the audio-visual library, the photographic section, slide programs, and motion pictures on Williamsburg, its history and significance."³ This department, which would be home to the new Motion Picture Production Unit, became a prolific independent producer of films throughout the ensuing decades, often and consistently winning the praises of critics for their accuracy and attention to detail.⁴

However, when officials at Colonial Williamsburg set out to produce *The Story of a Patriot*, they knew they would be creating something quite different from their usual movies. They intended this to be on an entirely different scale from previous productions, as it was to be the highlight of a new visitor center planned to open during the statewide celebration of the 350th anniversary of the landing at Jamestown.⁵ The visitor center would feature two special theaters designed just for the film, and the movie to be shown there had to be something truly extraordinary. To achieve this end, Colonial

² "CW's Newest Department to Make Movies, TV Films," *Colonial Williamsburg News* 4.6 (October 1951): 2.

³ "Arthur Smith Is Appointed New Department Head," *Colonial Williamsburg News* 4.2 (June 1951): 1.

⁴ James Curtis wrote in his 1978 critique of history films that those works "produced by Colonial Williamsburg contain few inaccuracies and are distinguished by an obvious concern for historical authenticity. No other organization has spent as much money producing educational media dealing with colonial American history." James C. Curtis, "Clio's Dilemma: To Be a Muse or to Be Amusing," in Ian M. G. Quimby, ed., *Material Culture and the Study of American Life* (New York: Norton, 1978), 207. Similarly, films produced by Colonial Williamsburg have been advocated for classroom use in *The History Teacher*. John Means Spencer, "An Analysis of a Conceptual Unit" *The History Teacher* 4.1 (1970), 54-7; J. William T. Youngs, Jr., "The Formative Years: A Critical Review of Audio-Visual Aids for Teaching American History, 1607-1789" *The History Teacher* 9.3 (1976), 379-407. On a side note, Williamsburg residents and tourists would also have been quite familiar with "colonial" reenactments through the annual production of *The Common Glory*, a live play about the American Revolution performed for tourists at the Lake Matoaka amphitheater on the campus of the College of William and Mary. The play began its thirty-year run in 1946.

⁵ "Curtain Set to Go Up at Jamestown," *Virginian-Pilot* 31 March 1957, 1A.

Williamsburg turned to Hollywood for its production expertise. Colonial Williamsburg sent a delegation to California in 1954 to consult with production supervisors and story editors at studios including MGM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, 20th-Century Fox, Columbia, Republic, Universal-International, and Disney.⁶ They hoped to gain advice on both film techniques and potential collaborators, as they planned to hire a screenwriter, director, and other production personal from sources outside of Williamsburg. They also received special permission from Darryl Zanuck to hire Frank McCarthy of 20th Century-Fox to consult on the project.⁷

At the same time, Colonial Williamsburg officials harbored some concern about the ability of Hollywood professionals to produce a good, accurate history film. Noting the “complete history of mediocrity” in Hollywood history films, executives in charge of planning insisted on retaining overall control of the film.⁸ In making hiring decisions, they resolved not to trade on their non-profit status for bargains: “We should not in any way be in their debt and should be able to be as tough on them as any Hollywood producer.”⁹ They wanted to combine the historical expertise of Colonial Williamsburg with the technical proficiency of the major studios, gaining the best of both worlds.

⁶ John Goodbody to Mr. Wilder, 8 November 1954, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 2.

⁷ Darryl Zanuck to Winthrop Rockefeller, 30 April 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

⁸ Arthur Smith to Carlisle Humelsine and John Goodbody, 11 October 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 2.

⁹ John Goodbody to M.A. Wilder, 8 November 1954, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 5-6.

Hegemony and Cold War America

In assessing what these workers brought to the film, however, we must take into account the influence of both cultural conditions and personal attitudes upon Hollywood and Williamsburg filmmakers. According to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the ideas of the culturally dominant group in society are promoted through mainstream popular culture: as T.J. Jackson Lears explains, "the essence of the concept [of hegemony] is not manipulation but legitimation. The ideas, values, and experiences of dominant groups are validated in public discourse; those of subordinate groups are not, though they may continue to thrive beyond the boundaries of received opinion."¹⁰ While not the same thing as social control – the ideas of society's leaders are not directly forced upon the masses – the pervasiveness of hegemonic ideology, which is spread through the "spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population," naturally influences the cultural productions of a society.¹¹ (At the same time, hegemony allows for the formation of alternative points of view, as Gramsci asserts that "the life of the State is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria . . . in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point."¹² However, even oppositional groups are forced to respond to the prevailing ideologies of the dominant cultural forces.) In this way, every cultural expression can be seen as a product of the social and historical atmosphere in which it was created.

¹⁰ T.J. Jackson Lears. "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 90.3 (June 1985), 574.

¹¹ Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 45; Lears, 587; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12.

¹² Gramsci, 182.

To understand *The Story of a Patriot* as such a cultural expression, we must first place it in the atmosphere of America in the 1950s. Coming in the wake of the Second World War and at the beginning of the Cold War, the era is most commonly remembered as the period of McCarthyism and unusually fierce anticommunism. According to Lary May, earlier decades of the twentieth century, and in particular the 1930s, had seen the flowering of reformism, but the coming of the Second World War and Cold War “delegitimized” calls for reform and emphasized a need for national solidarity and internal conformity.¹³ By the early 1950s, when *The Story of a Patriot* was first being planned, America’s conflict with the communist Soviet Union promoted a deep insecurity within American society and a need within America’s hegemonic bloc to justify its power by proving the correctness and success of the American capitalist system.¹⁴ This played out not simply in a new wave of “red scares” and heightened patriotism, but also in an increased concentration on the importance of material goods and affluence as a part of the “American Way.”¹⁵ This ideological glorification of American capitalism, combined with practical advances in production and booming business conditions, created an environment in which the “lures of consumerism . . . threatened to undermine willpower” and aroused white male fears of “dependence and subordination.” This helped lead, ironically, to a focus upon the merits of the entrepreneurial, independent white male within (and at times in conflict with) the greater conformist culture.¹⁶ It also at times added tension to the already fraught racial situation in the United States, as minorities

¹³ Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 141.

¹⁴ Dale Carter, “Evasive Action: War, Peace and Security in the Fifties,” in Dale Carter, ed. *Cracking the Ike Age: Aspects of Fifties America* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1992), 38.

¹⁵ Dale Carter, 39; May, 168.

¹⁶ May 168; Paul A. Carter, *Another Part of the Fifties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 91.

were often associated with the subservience which white males feared falling into themselves.¹⁷ In brief, then, a few of the key cultural leitmotifs of the 1950s included rabid anticommunism, pressures toward social conformity, glorification of the independent white male, and tension over racial issues.

Colonial Patriot or Cold Warrior?

All of these themes can clearly be seen in *The Story of a Patriot* and the thought that went into its production, binding the film firmly to the ideological atmosphere of its creation. The issue of anticommunism was very clearly in the minds of Colonial Williamsburg staff, and must surely have resonated with Hollywood personnel as well, as the “Hollywood Red Scare [was] in full flower” in the early 1950s.¹⁸ Association with the Communist Party meant job loss and blacklisting, stemming from the major studios’ Waldorf Statement of 1947 “declaring that no longer would the industry ‘knowingly employ a Communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States by force or illegal constitutional methods.’”¹⁹ The Colonial Williamsburg representatives—John Goodbody, M.A. Wilder, and Arthur Smith—who traveled to Hollywood on the information-gathering expedition in 1954 were clearly aware of this issue. In writing up their list of “top-30” choices for possible screenwriters, they first noted that

¹⁷ May, 164-5. As Paul Carter points out, gender battles were also being fought during the 50s. I am not focusing on this element of Cold War culture simply because the scarcity of women’s history in both *The Story of a Patriot* and especially in the documents relating to the film’s creation gives me little to work with other than a general statement of absence. Carter, 85-90.

¹⁸ May, 216.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

On the Hollywood bugaboo of political reliability, we were generally advised that we are safe if we employ someone who has had continuing recent employment with major studios. On the other hand, if we select someone who has been barred from work since the trial of “the Hollywood ten,” we might be asking for trouble or embarrassment for this or other Rockefeller interests. Before drawing up any contract with a writer – once the project is itself approved – I would favor a further check in Hollywood via Murphy and Life-Time and possibly one or more studios. This can be handled on a confidential basis.²⁰

As the representatives went on to list their choices, they noted the writers’ political positions when they felt that they might be problematic. For instance, they noted that their second choice, Ben Maddow, was one of the “petitioners for the Hollywood ten, but [he] has worked with major studios and is on no official blacklist.”²¹ Similarly, when they went through the selection process a second time after the death of their first choice, James Agee, Goodbody noted of Emmet Lavery that “his studio is considered extremely conservative and that there is no uneasy feeling whatever about Lavery’s politics; he has continued to have MGM assignments. I mention this only as part of the record.”²² While distancing himself from the system which required consideration of a writer’s politics, Goodbody was still clearly aware of the restrictions which the anticommunist fervor of the times placed upon Colonial Williamsburg’s hiring decisions.

It would be unfair, however, to suggest that Colonial Williamsburg was unwilling to take chances in their choice of staff. Indeed, a number of social progressives were selected to work on the film, most notably James Agee. Agee, a “celebrated left-wing writer” and social critic “who gained fame describing the dignity of the folk in the

²⁰ Goodbody to Wilder, 8 November 1954, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot Production Books* 1.3, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6. Interestingly, it was later noted that “Ben Maddow, once highly recommended, was dropped after further checking into background.” Could his politics have played a part? “Meeting of Program and Production Committee”, 14 March 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot Production Books* 1.3, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

²² Goodbody to Kenneth Chorley, 22 August 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot Production Books* 1.6, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 3.

Depression” was the first scriptwriter hired for the project, a daring choice for a major project if Colonial Williamsburg had been as stultifyingly conservative as it has sometimes been assumed.²³ Agee passed away shortly after beginning work, having produced only a brief treatment of his idea for the film, but within that work he pushed for a number of culturally progressive moves, including a focus on black history, a more balanced account of the arguments for and against revolution, and an interest in the common man.²⁴ James Curtis argues that “even had he lived he would not have been able to sell these ideas to Hollywood or to Colonial Williamsburg. His views were far too radical for either.”²⁵ However, there is evidence that there was, in fact, considerable admiration within Colonial Williamsburg for the Agee treatment. Thad Tate, a Colonial Williamsburg researcher assigned to the project in 1955 as a historical consultant, confirms that Agee’s work was circulated among the staff for reference, and though it did not become the basis for the final script it “interested” many involved with the project and was to influence the writer chosen as Agee’s replacement, Emmet Lavery.²⁶ Indeed, Lavery was sufficiently impressed with Agee’s work to pass it on to the film’s eventual director, George Seaton, explaining that “I thought he out to be familiar with” it “in a general way, before arriving in Williamsburg.”²⁷ Nor was Agee the only progressive

²³ May, 243-4; Curtis, 213.

²⁴ The treatment found in Agee’s apartment after his death was, according to Goodbody, “his preliminary draft [. . .] roughly two-thirds completed. Of this, the first part (up to page 15) was typed and really is a first draft of the treatment he was to submit to us. The rest has been taken from a penciled manuscript and from notes about the film which were found in his apartment.” The total forms a 47-page typed document. John C. Goodbody, “Treatment for New Information Center Film,” Internal memo, 13 June 1955, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 2.7, Media Productions Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

²⁵ Curtis, 213.

²⁶ Thad Tate, interview by Richard McCluney for *Story of a Patriot Retold*, dub of camera original tapes, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg; Fredrika J. Teute, “A Conversation with Thad Tate” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 50.2 (April 1993), 274.

²⁷ Emmet Lavery to John Goodbody, 22 Nov. 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.6, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

involved with the project. The “Patriot Theaters,” for example, were designed by renowned theater architect Ben Schlanger. Schlanger made his name in the 1930s creating structures which fused the principles of “Marxist and corporate designers” to combine “entertainment with functionalism.”²⁸ According to May, Schlanger’s goal was to reclaim the theater for the common man in order to “allow people to re-imagine the relation between consumerism and democracy.”²⁹ The employment of men such as Agee and Schlanger reflects the fact that while those working on *The Story of a Patriot* were quite aware of the political environment in which they worked, they were also willing to deal with thinkers outside of the mainstream.³⁰

The same Cold War tensions that produced concerns about Communists and left-wing thinkers within the film industry created worries about conformity and individualism within society. In viewing *The Story of a Patriot* the importance of the independent white male quickly becomes apparent. From the very opening the importance of freedom of action is emphasized, as the titles tell us that “This film, [is] dedicated to the principles of liberty wherever and whenever they may be under challenge”—a statement that overtly linking political struggles of the time with the story of the film’s hero, John Fry.³¹ Fry is positioned as an “everyman” character, but in point of fact he is a plantation owner and burgess, a member of the economic and social elite.

²⁸ May, 115, 117.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 118. While Schlanger’s designs for Colonial Williamsburg differed in purpose and context from his earlier work, it is interesting to note that they display the same interest in audience immersion and wrap-around screens that he was developing in the 1930s.

³⁰ It is not clear from the records whether Colonial Williamsburg chose to ignore Agee’s and Schlanger’s politics or whether officials were ignorant of them. Judging from the degree of interest shown in Colonial Williamsburg’s report of 1954 detailing possible improprieties of potential screenwriters, it seems unlikely that they would truly have been unaware of the men’s politics. In any case, it is evident that having a politicized background was not necessarily cause for blacklisting on this particular project.

³¹ *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot*, dir. George Seaton, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and Paramount Pictures, 1957, DVD.

His voice narrates the story and his perspective dominates. His personal independence is continually emphasized, both implicitly, in his freedom to travel about Williamsburg showing his family the sights, and explicitly, as the viewer watches him evaluate his situation and make his own decisions about his world and the future of his country. Fry actively chooses his American identity, and the close of the film makes the importance of his personal ability to choose as an independent white male quite clear: “Robert and I made our decision, my dear. It wasn’t an easy choice, but it was a free one, and if one wants to be free, one must learn to choose.”³² Indeed, this subject was of vital interest within Colonial Williamsburg at the time, as Tate points out, explaining that in the years after the Second World War the winning of freedom was an important theme in Colonial Williamsburg’s historical interpretation.³³ In this linkage of Fry, Williamsburg, liberty, and choice, then, the Cold War “ethos of the [white male] lone genius” is clearly articulated, a connection which was apparently fully evident to at least some in 1957.³⁴ For instance, at the film’s premier Virginia’s governor Thomas Stanley “described Williamsburg as ‘a symbol of the desire of mankind in its endless quest for the guarantees of freedom and justice so essential to individual happiness and peace.’”³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Tate, interview with McCluney.

³⁴ May, 205.

³⁵ “Stanley Hails Colonial Williamsburg At Dedication Of Information Center” *The Virginia Gazette* 5 April 1957, 17.

Figure 1

John Fry stands alone at the end of *The Story of a Patriot*



Image courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

“Robert and I made our decision, my dear. It wasn’t an easy choice, but it was a free one, and if one wants to be free, one must learn to choose.”

Throughout the film, John Fry epitomizes the strong, independent (wealthy) white male. As the movie ends, he stands alone before the capitol building and asserts the connection between his individuality and right to choice and the freedom of the nation.

The Independent Everyman: Consensus and Individualism

The opposite side of the social coin, conformity, is also evident in *The Story of a Patriot*. But before turning to themes of conformity in the film, the subject of “consensus history” begs discussion. The 1950s are now often noted as a period in which American historians promoted a “fantastic vision of a conflict-free American past” in which “the essential liberal, democratic, and ‘homogenous’ character” of the nation’s history was asserted.³⁶ The consensus view held that oppositional groups throughout American history were ineffective and gradually conformed to the mainstream. This take on history promoted claims of American “exceptionalism” in much the same period, identifying an essential difference between the progress of America and that of all other nations.³⁷ Ellen Fitzpatrick argues convincingly that “consensus history” represented in fact only one part of the historical work being done in the fifties, pointing to contemporary criticisms of the genre and noting the continuing work on “political conflict, economic struggle, racial oppression, and the burdens borne by ‘ordinary’ Americans” in the era as well as the emergence of books on the history of American communism, socialism, and other dissident strains of thought.³⁸ However, Fitzpatrick admits the prominence of a number of “consensus” histories published in the era; works such as Daniel Boorstin’s *The Genius of American Politics* (1953), Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America*

³⁶ Lears. 576; Cotton Seiler, “The American Revolution,” in Peter C. Rollins, ed. *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 53; Ellen Fitzpatrick, “The Myth of Consensus History,” in *History’s Memory: Writing America’s Past, 1880-1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), 189.

³⁷ Fitzpatrick, 190.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 191-193.

(1955), David Potter's *People of Plenty* (1954) and "to a lesser extent" Richard Hofstadter's *Age of Reform* (1955).³⁹

To what degree were consensus history and the Cold War need for internal conformity reflected in *The Story of a Patriot*? On one hand, the film does seem to reflect a variety of viewpoints on the subject of revolution, though our hero is eventually convinced by the case for independence. The Agee treatment even more clearly stressed the importance to Colonial Williamsburg of showing a reasonably nuanced view of the past. Agee was interested in showing as many sides of the question as possible, offering different characters to represent different backgrounds and ideas. On the side of the British loyalists there was to be an "Honest Tory" with "intelligence, insight and general humaneness," intended to give the "Loyalist point of view equal strength with that of the potential Revolutionist" in order to "be true to the past, and . . . give adequate intensity, justness and (to our general audience) surprise" to other characters' decision to affirm revolutionary values.⁴⁰ He was to be counterbalanced by a "Fuddy-Duddy Tory" representing the weaker elements of the loyalist argument, "pure conventionality and pure self-interest."⁴¹ The revolutionary equivalent of the Fuddy-Duddy was to be an "Opportunist" cobbler embodying pettiness, vice, and avarice—traits which Agee felt were altogether too prevalent in contemporary America as well.⁴² The Honest Tory was balanced by his good friend the "Jeffersonian Planter," described by Agee as a "scholar, an intellectual, and a skeptic" who would be converted in his loyalties from a neutral position towards a revolutionary mindset. Here we find a prototype for John Fry, though

³⁹ Ibid., 189.

⁴⁰ James Agee, "Some Notes on the Williamsburg Film," attached to memo of John C. Goodbody, "Treatment for New Information Center Film," 13 June 1955, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 2.7, Media Productions Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 10.

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

⁴² Ibid., 12.

the Jeffersonian Planter was not to be a stand-alone character as Fry is.⁴³ Fry's character is also reflected in Agee's "Frontiersman" in that the Frontiersman was an "everyman" and the pivotal figure in his story, a man whose decision to speak out after listening to both sides in a tavern debate would be the turning point of the plot.⁴⁴ Finally, there was also to be a completely neutral character, a visiting Frenchman, who would act as a sounding board for the other characters' ideas.⁴⁵ With this broad range of positions, it is evident that Agee (and his supporters among the Colonial Williamsburg staff) was interested in presenting struggles over control to a greater degree than the consensus model would allow.

However, ideas of consensus and conformity do certainly appear within the final product to a much greater extent than in the Agee treatment. This comes out most clearly in the structure of the plot, as the film ends with a total lack of oppositional characters. Throughout the course of the film those who rejected or doubted the revolutionary position have either been converted (as, for instance, Fry himself is), have left the country, or have conveniently disappeared from the story (most notably Fry's mother.) The closing scenes show a unanimous vote for independence being taken and met with general acclaim from the crowd gathered around the capitol. It would seem, indeed, that this version of America was able to avoid internal conflict and assimilate its dissidents just as the consensus model of history posited.

⁴³ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴ John C. Goodbody, "Treatment for New Information Center Film," 13 June 1955, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 2.7, Media Productions Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 9.

John Fry, Slaveholder: Race in 1950s America

Of the major Cold War tropes identified earlier, then, we have seen that *The Story of a Patriot* does reflect the era's tensions over anticommunism, conformity, and white male individualism. This leaves racial issues, which did indeed play a considerable part in the ideological struggles behind the film. In addition to the importance of race in forming a Cold War identity, this was an important time in the postwar Civil Rights movement, as the Montgomery bus boycott began only a year before production started, while Eisenhower introduced the Civil Rights Act of 1957 in the very year the film was released.⁴⁶ In reading the materials created during the scripting of the film, the importance of race issues and racial history becomes abundantly clear. In the Agee treatment, the earliest version of the film, black history was actually to be featured: Agee wrote that one "thing which must continually come through, is the fact of Slavery. This must not be hit very hard – to hit it hard would be false to the awareness of the time; but it is there, as steadily as shadow in sunlight."⁴⁷ "To us as we watch it," he emphasized, "this must be a constant irony, considering 'Liberty' and 'Independence' and something like 'Equality' as underlying themes" of the film.⁴⁸ He also included a small Native American part, as the native watched white men with a "sense of dignity and reproach."⁴⁹

As the Agee work was distributed to readers, this issue of race proved to be particularly inflammatory. The "over emphasis on slaves and their activities should be

⁴⁶ In a local anecdote from the period, a sixth-grade student visiting a statue at Jamestown in 1957 was reported to have made the connection between race and colonial life quite clearly as the student remarked that Pocahontas "married a white man so she must have been the first 'intergrationist' [sic] in America!" Agnes White Thomas, "Sixth Graders Learn History at Jamestown" *Virginian-Pilot* 2 April 1957, 6.

⁴⁷ James Agee, 13 June 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 2.7, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 13.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

toned down considerably” urged one reader, while another blustered “I find the attention and construction put upon the matter of slavery also embarrassing and improbable and inappropriate to this project.”⁵⁰ Another reader acknowledged that Agee showed “much understanding of the position of the Negro” but still felt that there was “a tendency to over-emphasize” that aspect of the story.⁵¹

Black history emerged in other contexts during the planning of the film as well. At one point there was an idea of including a slave auction, though it never made it into a script; there was also to be a “mulatto case” scene—based upon actual historical events—in which Fry would observe Thomas Jefferson “arguing against the theory of chattel rights in a third generation slave.”⁵² While the mulatto case was eventually cut, due to both a paucity of historical documentation dealing with the historical case upon which it was based and for reasons of plot continuity, it clearly prompted thought on the place of black history both within the Revolution and in the 1950s.⁵³ As Arthur Smith mused:

⁵⁰ A. E. Kendrew to Humelsine, 15 June 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.5, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 1; Arthur Tourtellot to Humelsine, 29 June 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 2.

⁵¹ E.M. Riley to Dr. Alexander, 17 June 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.5, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

⁵² Goodbody to Emmet Lavery, 22 December 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.6, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 5; Lavery, “The Williamsburg Story Treatment and Production Notes,” January 1956, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 2.7, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg. The “mulatto case” was based upon the real-life case of *Howell v. Netherland*, which was indeed argued by Jefferson.

⁵³ As Richard Handler and Eric Gable note, this issue of “evidence” and the lack thereof has long been a vital part of Colonial Williamsburg’s explanation of their historical interpretation. Handler and Gable assert that the staff members they interviewed in the early 1990s “explain Colonial Williamsburg’s changing history in terms of the limitations, errors, and ideological biases of others’ interpretations; but they almost always presented the foundation’s current research as nonideological, non-paradigm driven, based solely on known facts and concern for accuracy” (77). This relates directly to Colonial Williamsburg’s treatment of black history over the decades, as “discomfort” and avoidance of the subject could be justified by the argument that “black history was, as they often complained, ‘undocumented’—it verged on fiction: it never quite had the same just-the-facts authenticity as the stories they could tell about the elite white inhabitants of the town” (84). With such an excuse to steer clear of the subject, it wasn’t really until the 1990s that the brutal reality of blacks-as-property (an issue under debate in the proposed “mulatto case” scene) would be presented in an immersive dramatic form for Colonial Williamsburg’s visitors, in the highly controversial reenactment of a slave auction and an audience-participation program,

Returning for a moment to the mulatto case, I wonder how this fits into present day agitation on the issue of segregation? It could be taken several ways. I suppose that some visitors might react that after 175 years Williamsburg, Virginia hasn't moved very far forward. Or, conversely, perhaps this sequence would reiterate the feelings of some of the great Revolutionary Virginians and hence be considered as a guiding heritage not to be forgotten in the present tension? I'm not sure.⁵⁴

Despite this interest in inclusion, however, the final film shows relatively little of blacks in the Revolution, and certainly does not depict them outside of positions as servants and slaves. In the end, the film actually included a line *offensive* to blacks rather than acknowledging their importance in colonial times, as a line was inserted in a tavern scene suggesting that black servants were "taking advantage" of their masters' drunkenness to steal from them. While the offending line was cut in 1968—the only documented change made to the film since its release—it is worth noting how very little the struggles over minority history came to, a fact which must surely be linked not only to the plot but to the general social attitudes of the time.⁵⁵

"Enslaving Virginia." While a lack of firm historical evidence is certainly important for an organization such as Colonial Williamsburg to note in its interpretation of the past, it is worth at least considering whether an assertion of "absence of documents" in such a vital and contentious facet of history is always made in entirely good faith. Here again, the social and political attitudes prevalent in American culture have surely influenced the way history is told—and not told. Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 76-7, 84-92; Dan Eggen, "In Williamsburg, the Painful Reality of Slavery," *Washington Post* 7 July 1999, *Washingtonpost.com* 26 October 2006 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>.

⁵⁴ Arthur Smith to Goodbody, 24 January 1956, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot Production* Books 1.5, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg, 2.

⁵⁵ Smith to Alexander, 26 August 1968, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot Production* Books 3.14, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg. The offending line comes in the montage dealing with the sacrifices made during the boycott of British goods. John Fry's voice-over narration states that "Without a doubt, the embargo is having its effect. The ladies are learning the comforts of homespun linsey-woolsey, sassafras tea is served at our best tables and the finest gentlemen are learning that New Jersey's cider has many of the properties of imported Madeira . . . and some of the finest servants are taking advantage of it." As this last phrase was read, a black tavern servant took money off the table of a drunken white gentleman. Interestingly, this line was not a part of any of the scripts included in the Production Books from before the shooting of the film. It first makes its appearance in print in the Dictaphone script made from the film as a public relations copy in 1957. Perhaps this line was improvised on the set. If so, it would certainly seem to be coming out of the casual attitudes of the 1950s. The only other cut to the film of which I am aware is not related to race. According to both Cary Carson, Vice President of Research at Colonial Williamsburg, and Richard McCluney, Vice President of Productions, Publications, and Learning Ventures, during certain periods the introductory preface to the film was not shown in theaters. I have been

Figure 2

Slavery depicted in *The Story of a Patriot*

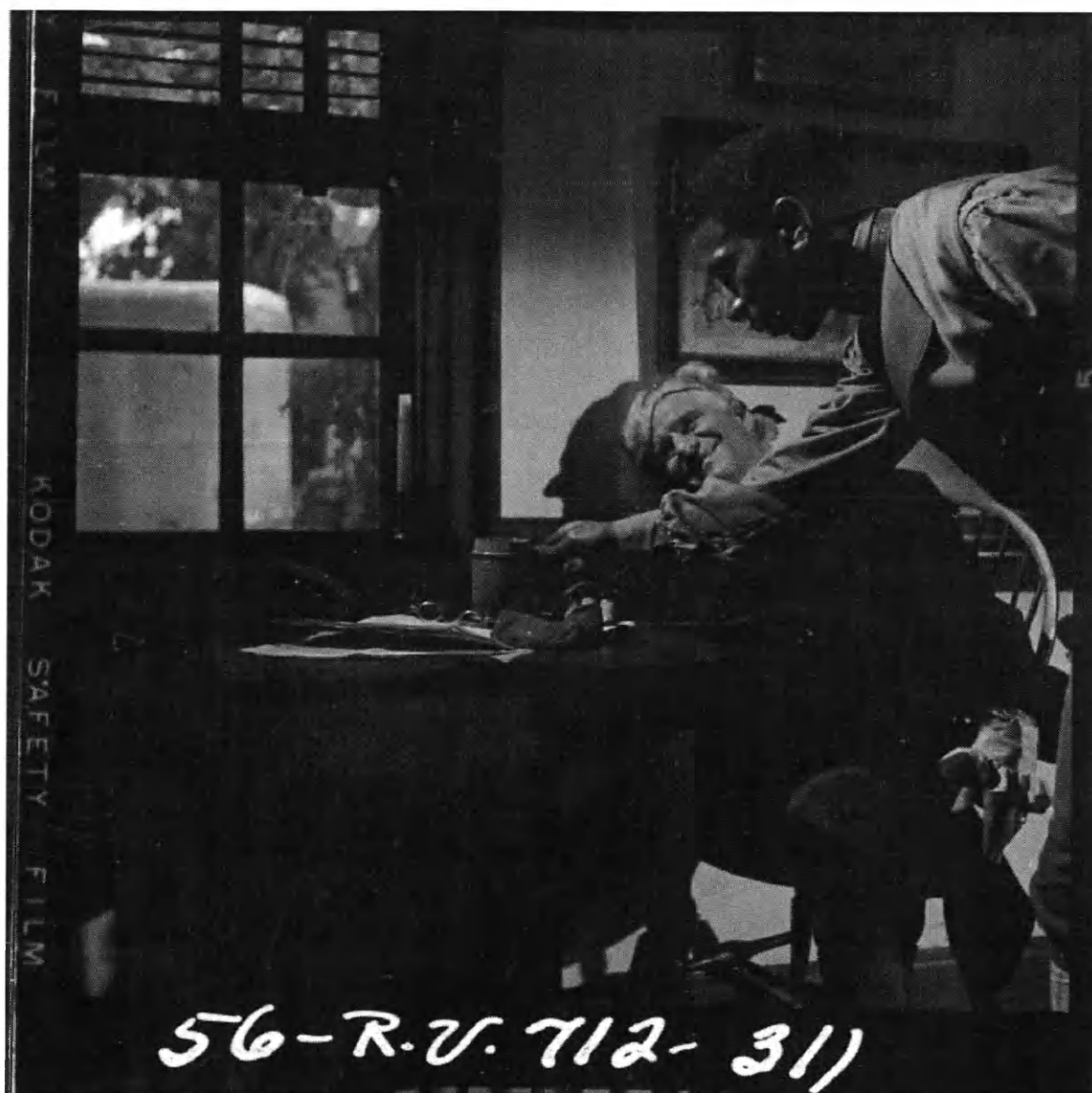


Image courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

The Story of a Patriot does not directly treat the issues of slavery and black history, and only shows blacks in minor roles as servants and slaves. Indeed, in the original version of the tavern scene from which this image was taken, blacks are actually shown in a negative light, as the waiter steals money from the table of a drunken white gentleman.

Technology Ideology

The Story of a Patriot is clearly, then, very much a product of the late 1950s, a fact which is reflected not only in its ideology but also in the technology that was used in its creation. As “one of the most technologically advanced films of its time,” *The Story of a Patriot* took advantage of many of the cinematic innovations of the 1950s, including the use of widescreen and a precursor of modern surround-sound.⁵⁶ The late 1940s and 1950s saw a number of setbacks for Hollywood film studios, as they encountered rising production costs, tariffs abroad, charges of monopoly, the dissolution of strong urban audiences as suburbanization increased, the ever-increasing competition of television, and new patterns of work and leisure which made “short-term needs for inexpensive entertainment” such as the movies less pressing.⁵⁷ Hollywood sought to retain and lure back its audiences with spectacular new film techniques, refining the widescreen and 3-D methods first developed in the 1920s and deploying them en masse alongside new developments in color (such as Kodak Eastmancolor) and stereophonic sound systems.⁵⁸ Many of the major studios created their own widescreen technologies, beginning with the curved-screen techniques of Fox’s Cinerama, which was soon followed by VistaVision at

unable to document such a cut, but as records on the film are scanty after the 1960s, I have no reason to disbelieve this. McCluney asserts that this varying use of the prologue was not based upon its content but was “an administrative decision at some level depending on who was supervising admissions and the Visitor Center over the years. From time-to-time, an audio introduction to the film including some enhanced information about tickets and visiting the Historic Area, or short slide introductions, and short 16mm introductions have been run as a substitute for the original Seaton prologue. These choice[s] were simply based on the operational strategy of the time and who was in charge.” Cary Carson, personal communication with author, 11 September 2006; Richard McCluney, personal communication with author, 20 September 2006.

⁵⁶ Richard L. McCluney, Jr. “Remastering a Masterwork,” *Colonial Williamsburg* Summer 2004, 38.

⁵⁷ David Parkinson, *History of Film* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 155-156; John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 258-259.

⁵⁸ Parkinson, 160; Tom Stempel, *American Audiences on Movies and Moviegoing* (Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 2001), 18, 22; Frank A. Salamone, *Popular Culture in the Fifties* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 164.

Paramount and then Mike Todd's wide-angle lens, 70mm Todd-AO process.⁵⁹ These formats were truly an innovation, as "the motion picture screen, which had resolutely remained more or less 'square'" from 1889 until the early 1950s suddenly underwent radical changes in shape and dimension.⁶⁰

As early as 1954, Colonial Williamsburg knew they wanted to work with such innovative techniques in *The Story of a Patriot*, planning originally to use the brand-new Todd-AO process and producing an early version of surround-sound through Todd-AO's six-channel sound system. Much thought was given to the proper system to be used, as production staff proposed running their own series of film tests and building a special theater just to explore the results; they even commissioned the production of their own Todd-AO camera specifically for this purpose.⁶¹ Though a number of factors influenced the conversion to Paramount's VistaVision system, one primary reason for this interest in cutting-edge technology remained the same: the film's originators firmly believed that the most effective method that *The Story of a Patriot* could employ in teaching history was a total immersion of the audience in the story on the screen.

As Thad Tate explained, while the film's producers certainly did want the film to introduce visitors to Colonial Williamsburg to all the important sites in the restored

⁵⁹ Parkinson, 160-162.

⁶⁰ Belton, 261.

⁶¹ Goodbody to Wilder, 8 November 1954, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Production Archives, Colonial Williamsburg; Wilder, "Information Center – Todd-AO Negotiations", 31 January 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, 1; "Meeting of Program and Production Committee" 14 March 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, 4; Goodbody to George Seaton, 4 November 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, 2; "Telephone Conversation Between Douglas Shearer of MGM in Culver City, Calif. and Ben Schlanger in N.Y." 7 November 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, 1; "Report on Viewing New Twentieth Century-Fox Cinemascope at 444 West 56th St., N.Y.C. with Arthur Smith on November 9, 1955 and Meeting with Earl Sponable," 9 November 1955, *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, 1.

museum-city, they wanted to avoid a “you are here,” map-style production.⁶² In the earliest stages of the movie’s planning, Colonial Williamsburg determined that “We have a unique opportunity to provide each viewer with an intimate, immediate awareness of the story so that he constantly feels a sense of participation in the activity on the screen. This permits a ‘you are there’ and ‘you are they’ impression” in which “you can literally glide up the sluggish James River with a bank of wilderness on either side, or jog with the post rider down Duke of Gloucester Street.”⁶³ Reflecting a general concern in Colonial Williamsburg at the time to make the area “look alive,” this idea of *The Story of a Patriot* as “a ‘magic carpet’ to carry visitors to the mood and atmosphere of the 18th century” was affirmed again and again throughout the movie’s development.⁶⁴ No one “on the project intended to make anything so prosaic as an orientation film. Their purpose was to inspire the audience with the high drama of the prelude to Independence, the story that made the Historic Area something to see. No one wanted to do a film on *how* to see it.”⁶⁵ “Our objective,” Goodbody asserted, “is to involve the participant so emotionally with the scene before his eyes that he literally lives in the eighteenth century.”⁶⁶ Total immersion in the story was to be the key to involving the audience in the history and making viewers know and care about the past, teaching why individual colonial “patriots” made the choices they did.

⁶² Tate, interview with McCluney.

⁶³ Goodbody to Wilder, 8 November 1954, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3. Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 4.

⁶⁴ Handler and Gable, 74; John Kinnier, “Information Center Opened” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* 1 April 1957, 1.

⁶⁵ Dennis Montgomery, “A New Crisis Confronts *The Patriot*” *Colonial Williamsburg*, Summer 1995, 64.

⁶⁶ Goodbody to Wilder and Smith, 7 March 1955, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3. Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 2.

This interest in immersion clearly shaped the form of the film and the way in which it was exhibited. In selecting actors for the lead roles, Colonial Williamsburg chose “generally unfamiliar actors” from the “New York television pool” rather than pursuing familiar faces which might distract the audience from the story.⁶⁷ This was especially true in the selection of Jack Lord, then a relative unknown, to play John Fry, as Fry was to be an everyman character. Immersion in the movie’s world was also promoted through the intertwining of filming methods and exhibition, as the “film was composed for the theater, and the theater was designed for the film.”⁶⁸ Theater architect Ben Schlanger worked closely in collaboration with director George Seaton and his cameramen, even producing a 6-foot model of the theater with the screen area cut out so that Seaton and his assistants could “put their heads inside and see how scenes would appear on the screen.”⁶⁹ Shooting a film in this mindset required that the views seen through the camera “must so closely approximate normal vision that the audience, in effect, is the camera and everything that is seen has the same effect on the screen as it would have to the eye – if the camera had been a human eye.”⁷⁰

Within the theater itself, the illusion of immersion was to be advanced through every aspect of the design. The seating was arranged in eight tiers with metal barriers rising between each row to block out the heads of other viewers and maintain an “illusion of space inside them and the sense imparted of complete removal from the outside world.”⁷¹ This architecture encouraged the individual viewer to feel that the film was

⁶⁷ Bosley Crowther, “Screen: Williamsburg” *New York Times* 1 Apr 1957, 22; Tate interview with McCluney.

⁶⁸ Montgomery, 68.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁰ Smith to files, 8 November 1954, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 14.

⁷¹ Crowther, 22.

directed individually at him or herself. The theaters integrated the experience with the viewer's own senses and allowed the mental association with the independent everyman-hero John Fry to become ever more complete. To further assert Fry's connection with the audience and to promote viewers' identification with him, the narration of his internal thoughts was put on the "interior" sound track of the film, situating Fry's narrative as a voice inside the viewer's head.⁷² The screens themselves were curved to create a fuzziness at the edges which would "trick the brain by mimicking the natural viewing area of the eye," while the top and bottom of the screen reached from the ceiling to the floor in an attempt to prevent "any artificial 'picture-on-the-wall' effect".⁷³ There were even suggestions of taking the immersive aspects of the theaters to a whole different level, as former Colonial Williamsburg audiovisual director Arthur Smith asserts: a "proposal was seriously considered whereby a 'presence track' would activate the entire seating area of a floating auditorium by means of converting audio energy to mechanical energy, feeding hydraulic springs." This "idea was abandoned, not for lack of courage but because it was felt that the effect would be distracting in terms audience awareness."⁷⁴ After all, Colonial Williamsburg determined, if "our theater is so unique that the audience is aware of its uniqueness, we have lost the attention of our audience in the screen action, and the film is therefore of little value."⁷⁵ All of these immersive

⁷² This was done by having Fry's voice-overs fed through the sixth channel of the six-channel Todd-AO system, which was the "surround sound" channel. Richard McCluney, personal communication with author, 1 February 2006.

⁷³ Montgomery, 62; Ben Schlanger, "The Colonial Williamsburg Theaters for a Wide-Screen Participation Film: The Evolution of the Williamsburg System: Motion Picture System from Camera to Viewer," *SMPTE Journal* 70.9 (1961): 680-685, *Widescreen Museum*. 19 Oct. 2005 <<http://www.widescreenmuseum.com>>; Montgomery, 62.

⁷⁴ Arthur L. Smith, "The Colonial Williamsburg Theaters for a Wide-Screen Participation Film: Planning for the Film Presentation," *SMPTE Journal* 70.9 (1961): 677-679, *Widescreen Museum*. 19 Oct. 2005 <<http://www.widescreenmuseum.com>>.

⁷⁵ Goodbody to files, 16 January 1956, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 8.

Figure 3

The interior of the Patriot Theaters



Images courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Figure 4

A view of that part of the sound system located behind the screen in one of the Patriot Theaters.



Image courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

The Patriot Theaters are equipped for the Todd-AO six-channel sound of *The Story of a Patriot*, a precursor to modern surround-sound systems. Sound is used in the film as an immersive tool and to promote audience identification with the character of John Fry and all that he stands for.

innovations are neatly summed up in a letter Smith sent to Boyce Nemeč of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers in 1955. “What is new about all this?” he wrote,

I would say that more than anything else it is the movement through idealism to realism. . . . we are processing, experimentally, a number of ideas which are radical even if not completely new: peripheral modulation, sympathetic surrounds, barrier walls between rows of seats, possible added use of high frequency electrostatic speakers, seat vibration, optical, vacuum environment, sound sphere, completely ‘dead’ theatres. Even more significant, in a way, may be our intent to plan and film our screen play to fit a specific theatre. This alone may turn out to be the most important single thing which we may do.⁷⁶

Thus it is clear that much thought went into building theaters which would be the best able to serve the needs of *The Story of a Patriot*, totally immersing audiences in the actions upon the screen as subtly as possible.

Stepping Out: *The Story of a Patriot* Beyond the 1950s

To look at *The Story of a Patriot* strictly as an artifact of 1950s technologies and ideologies, however, is to miss at least half of the story. For this film has been playing continuously for nearly fifty years now, and the course of time has wrought many changes in both the official presentation of the film and in the ways in which audiences have received it. With historical change have come shifting priorities, new audiences, and ever-evolving ideas about the ways in which history should be taught, films should be viewed, and Americans should understand their collective past.

Perhaps the easiest historical change to trace is the evolution of the film’s exhibition. *The Story of a Patriot* was explicitly made strictly for the Patriot Theaters at

⁷⁶ Smith to Boyce Nemeč, 16 May 1955, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 2-3. (I have corrected a spelling error in this quote.)

the Colonial Williamsburg visitor center. However, before the movie was even released the production staff at Colonial Williamsburg were having second thoughts about the limitations this plan of exhibition placed upon them. When writing up contracts for workers on the film, Colonial Williamsburg had agreed that “said photoplay will not be shown commercially in motion picture theatres, but will be exhibited only in two theatres to be built for its exhibition in Williamsburg solely for tourists.”⁷⁷ Soon after, however, Colonial Williamsburg realized the benefits of being able to release the film for “prestige and special screenings and the use of the film by United States Governmental agencies” as well as for rental “in 16mm form for school or adult groups.”⁷⁸ Considerable thought and effort went into procuring waivers from the actors and crew to permit such showings. John Goodbody advised in autumn of 1956 that Colonial Williamsburg not pursue such waivers until after the film was released and there were signs of the anticipated “demand from the USIA and the defense Department.” Seeking waivers beforehand, he suggested, might imply that the original agreement was not made in good faith, “whereas they could scarcely question requests from the USIA or others after the film was exhibited. Our objective, I believe, is to get clearance for any showing for which no admission is charged. Television is definitely out. The question of 16-mm rental release can be taken up when and if we replace the film in the Information Center.”⁷⁹ As it happened, extensive correspondence and negotiations with the Screen Actors Guild succeeded in gaining permission for such outside exhibition, and even the issue of television was taken

⁷⁷ Goodbody to Humelsine, 9 November 1956, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.13, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁹ Goodbody to Humelsine, 1 October 1956, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 1.3, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 3.

up again in the early 1960s, though it was made clear at that point that commercial broadcast of the film would not be acceptable.⁸⁰

As soon as permission had been granted, copies of *The Story of a Patriot* migrated from their intended home. Eighty-three prints of the film were sold outright in the first year that it was available. Rentals were even more popular, despite being limited to non-commercial exhibition by “schools, colleges, museums, historical societies, public libraries and government agencies directly responsible for educational programs.”⁸¹ By 1978, at least “twenty-five hundred prints of the film” had been purchased by educational groups.⁸² The Defense Department alone ordered 597 prints in 1959, and by the film’s tenth anniversary it was announced that “a conservative estimate indicates that over two million members of the Armed Forces have seen the film” through the Troop Information Program.⁸³ *The Story of a Patriot* was also shown in a number of “prestige” screenings, winning the Chris Statuette at the Columbus Film Festival in 1960 and receiving a Scholastic Teacher Award in 1961 in the category “Information – Education.”⁸⁴ While this distribution was not universally approved within Colonial Williamsburg—some felt that it ought to keep its “‘only in Williamsburg’ appeal”—the general conclusion was that

⁸⁰ John L. Dales, National Executive Secretary of the Screen Actors Guild, to Donald Gonzales, 9 January 1962, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 2.11, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg. The only evidence I have found of the film playing on commercial television is the use of excerpts “for ABC News/Summit ’83.”

⁸¹ Leclere to Freeman, 22 March 1962, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1; Strom to Alexander, 23 September 1960, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.15, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

⁸² Curtis, 211.

⁸³ Strom to Alexander, 23 September 1960, 1; “‘Patriot’ Celebrates Tenth Anniversary More Than 85,000 Showings Since 1957” *Colonial Williamsburg News* 4 April 1967, 3.

⁸⁴ Michael R. Pitts, *Hollywood and American History: A Filmography of Over 250 Motion Pictures Depicting U.S. History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1984), 312; George B. Eager, 15 June 1961, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.12, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1; Strom to Alexander, 24 April 1960, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.12, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

exhibition outside of Williamsburg could serve in a “promotional and educational” role.⁸⁵ However, in allowing *The Story of a Patriot* to play this part, the original linkage between the Patriot Theaters and the *Patriot* film was broken.

This bond was also strained by changes in the film’s exhibition within Williamsburg itself. Over the years the film was forced to leave its namesake theaters a number of times. In 1976, for example, showings were moved to the Williamsburg Conference Center to make room for an eight-minute orientation film to serve the crowds expected for the bicentennial, while in 1984 it played in the Williamsburg Theatre on Merchants Square while the Visitor Center (formerly known as the Information Center) was being renovated.⁸⁶ Yet another means of seeing the movie outside of its intended venue became available on March 14, 1984, when the 20 Williamsburg-area hotels equipped with Hotelvision began playing the film “more than 18 times per day . . . on an alternating schedule with ‘Williamsburg Panorama,’” a show on local attractions.⁸⁷ This was only a temporary situation, meant to complement the Williamsburg Theatre showings while the Visitor Center was under construction. When the Patriot Theaters reopened the film was withdrawn from Hotelvision (except in those hotels owned by Colonial Williamsburg itself.)⁸⁸ Despite the temporary nature of these examples, they all

⁸⁵ Goodbody to Humelsine, 2 July 1958, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.13, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1; Battle to Humelsine, 2 September 1960, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.13, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 2.

⁸⁶ “Williamsburg History Film Provides Special Background,” Colonial Williamsburg Publicity release, May 1976, 4; “News from Colonial Williamsburg,” Colonial Williamsburg publicity release, 13 March 1984, 2. According to Cary Carson, Richard McCluney, and Michael Durling, during the bicentennial the Patriot Theaters themselves were changed, as the seats were ripped out and replaced with “fanny rails” to help facilitate the movement of expected crowds; after the bicentennial the seats were replaced. Cary Carson, personal communication with author, 11 September 2006; Richard McCluney, personal communication with author, 20 September 2006; Michael Durling, personal communication with author, 20 September 2006.

⁸⁷ “News,” 1.

⁸⁸ Richard McCluney, personal communication with author, 1 February 2006.

were periods in which *The Story of a Patriot* was severed from the environment for which it was designed.

These changes in exhibition naturally affected the reception of the film over time because of their effect on the level of immersion for audiences. As producers within Colonial Williamsburg were well aware, removing the movie from its theaters seriously affected the nature of the film. As we have seen, immersion was considered a vital aspect of *The Story of a Patriot* from its earliest days, and this immersion was achieved not only through the storyline but through the technical effects produced with the 70mm double-frame VistaVision film (which allowed for an unusually high image clarity and resolution) and a surround-sound system within the Patriot Theaters.⁸⁹ Showing the film through 16mm prints meant a loss of the sound and visual effects made possible by the Patriot Theaters as well as a generally lower quality of print. Indeed, Goodbody went so far as to assert that “the Information Center projection is so different that it is almost like seeing a different film.”⁹⁰ General distractions from immersion must also have been much greater when the film was shown in a hotel or club situation, outside of a theater environment which would encourage focused attention upon the screen.⁹¹ In all of these ways the immersive power of the film, and thus its ability to impart its message about colonial history and to promote the intended system of viewing, must have been diminished.

⁸⁹ John Goodbody, “Plot Summary and Production Notes,” nd, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 2.8, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 3.

⁹⁰ Goodbody to Humelsine, 2 July 1958, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.13, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

⁹¹ At the same time, Carson points out that audiences *do* have a high tolerance for distractions and tend to have a much higher willingness to suspend belief than the Patriot Theater’s designers imagined. Indeed, Carson argues that the Theaters themselves are valuable relics of a 1950s psychology in which Colonial Williamsburg administrators had a very different understanding of visitors’ abilities to adjust to “jumps” in time and location. Cary Carson, personal communication with author, 11 September 2006.

Audience immersion in the film was also affected by the ways in which Colonial Williamsburg marketed *The Story of a Patriot* through other materials. The Colonial Williamsburg Information Center sold both postcards and slides featuring scenes from the movie, allowing the visitor to relive the story through still shots at any time and in any environment. There was considerable thought given to producing a soundtrack album from the film as well, which would not only provide income but “would be a pretty good field advertisement for Williamsburg.”⁹² The idea of creating *Story of a Patriot* paper dolls was suggested, and though there were fears that “there is in the very idea of paper dolls an implication that the motion picture and the individual actors may be demeaned in some way,” a set of eight “Williamsburg Colonial Dolls” was in fact produced in 1967.⁹³ The set, which was advertised as an “educational activity” featuring “costumed figures from the film *Williamsburg – The Story of a Patriot*” included John Fry, Anne Fry, Caroline Fry, Robert Fry, Madam Fry, Captain Nicholas, and the slaves Cato and Virginia – essentially a male-female pairing of young whites, middle-aged whites, old whites, and adult blacks. Several outfits and accessories were provided for each figure, and the set came with an informational sheet offering basic information about Williamsburg’s history, visiting Colonial Williamsburg, and the fashions of the colonial period (describing especially the types of garments offered with the dolls). This was meant to be both entertaining and educational—the sheet even offered suggestions for further reading—but it was also clearly commercial, promoting the authenticity and popularity of Colonial Williamsburg.

⁹² Smith to Goodbody, 9 March 1959, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.15, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1. I have no evidence that such a soundtrack was ever produced, though the exit theme of the film was included on a Bernard Hermann anthology cd “The Inquirer Suite.”

⁹³ Leclere to Cross, 29 December 1965, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.13, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

Figure 5

Image of Colonial Williamsburg's *Story of a Patriot* paper dolls (1967), showing the slaves Cato and Virginia and an older white couple (Madam Fry and Captain Nicholas).



The set of paper dolls also includes John, Anne, Caroline, and Robert Fry. Not only are these dolls interesting in relation to the film, they raise many questions about the attitudes and cultural assumptions of their creators and users. Why are slaves given a prominent presence here when they are generally neglected in the film released ten years earlier? Why does the little girl (Caroline) come with removable petticoats when none of the other women do? Why is Virginia fully dressed while the other ladies are in their undergarments? Are the broad, toothy grins on the slaves representative of older stereotypes? (Caroline is the only other figure to smile with her mouth open.) These and other issues surely merit a study of their own. It's also worth considering that these very same dolls are still sold in Colonial Williamsburg gift shops, albeit in much simpler packaging. The dolls are identical, and the information sheet is reproduced word for word – right down to the now century-old suggested reference books – with only two changes. The original sheet described Cato and Virginia as “negro servants,” the current version writes of them as “slaves.” In the 1967 set it is asserted that eighteenth century men dressed in “gay” colors; today they are reduced to “bright” colors.

Through these dolls, as well as through slides, postcards, and other ephemera, audiences were invited to engage with the film outside of the theater environment. The characters, their personalities, and their problems were freed from the conventions of both the filmed story and from the dictates of established history. Imagination was encouraged to take a leading role in the audience's experience of the past, but with only limited guidance from historians or the history film. It is, of course, difficult to say what overall effect this had on the viewer. On the one hand, such imaginative engagement might well lead to a greater immersion in the story of the film and the themes it emphasized—assuming the user had seen and could remember the story. But such an unstructured use of materials certainly could not be guaranteed to promote the particular knowledge and absorption which the film's producers sought to create. The effect of these commercial ventures on the film's reception is thus quite unclear, but this added layer of interaction (either before or after viewing) must surely have affected audiences to some degree.

Change over time also brought about differences in the expectations brought to the film by *The Story of a Patriot*'s audiences. As moviegoers, visitors in the 1950s would have seen the techniques displayed in *The Story of a Patriot* as cutting-edge examples of film technology, but the images upon the screen would still have fit in with the basic formulas they were used to seeing, both technologically and ideologically. As the years passed, however, new film technologies developed and both the acting styles and images presented in the Patriot Theaters came to be clearly dated. This trend was only exacerbated by the continuing degradation in the film's quality. As early as 1964 Colonial Williamsburg was having difficulty obtaining good prints, as they went through

about 10 prints a year at the Visitor Center.⁹⁴ In 1970, the film's Producer, William Wright, complained strongly to George Seaton about the quality of a copy he had recently screened, describing it as "a venereal print. Even the grass seemed to be suffering the red rash of syphilis."⁹⁵ Indeed, by 1971 Colonial Williamsburg was forced to "fully realize that the original camera negative (VISTAVISION) is no longer printable, [and] have asked whether it would be feasible to make a duplicate set of silver separations from the existing set as further protection."⁹⁶ Of course, by then the film had already outlived its expected five to seven year lifespan, though it wasn't to be fully restored for another twenty years. As the film gradually deteriorated, the worsening image condition combined with changing audience expectations to create a viewing experience far removed from the technically advanced "naturalistic" and immersive atmosphere originally intended.

Viewers' reactions to the film also altered as America's general social environment changed. The hegemonic ideologies so important in the 1950s and the importance of Cold War attitudes shifted in strength and relevance as America moved into the Vietnam War and later into the social milieu of the 1980s, 1990s, and the early 21st century.⁹⁷ While many of these specific changes and their effects on audience responses to *The Story of a Patriot* are difficult to trace, one situation stands out as a

⁹⁴ Smith to Lofquist at Technicolor, 10 August 1964, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.15, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1; Smith to Miss M.A. Barkley, 29 March 1971, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.15, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

⁹⁵ William Wright to George Seaton, 9 November 1970, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.15, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

⁹⁶ Smith to Mr. Norman at Technicolor, 8 January 1971, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.15, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

⁹⁷ A thorough analysis of all the dominant cultural forces in the second half of the twentieth century is far beyond my ability to cover in this brief work, so I will not attempt to trace the abundant social changes here. Future researchers might well find this topic to be a rewarding subject for further study.

shining example of the ways in which change over time reshaped viewers' engagement with the film. When looking for talent to cast in *The Story of a Patriot*, Colonial Williamsburg did not want big-name stars, seeking to avoid a situation in which a famous face "cannot simply disappear into the character."⁹⁸ However, those in charge of the film couldn't have known that eleven years after the film's release, in 1968, their "everyman" actor Jack Lord would shoot to stardom as the lead character in the television series *Hawaii Five-O*. After becoming familiar with Lord as detective Steve McGarrett, many viewers found it quite difficult to separate the tropical investigator from the colonial planter. As Curtis explained in 1978, audiences "today may have difficulty identifying with the central character It is not that John Frye [*sic*] is unbelievable; it is simply that Jack Lord who plays John Frye has since become Inspector Steve McGarrett."⁹⁹

Dick Schaap showed this force in action in a *New York Times* article from 1976.

Describing a family vacation to Colonial Williamsburg, Schaap explains that

As soon as the fictional 'patriot' of the film's title appeared on the screen, my son snapped to attention. 'It's McGarrett,' he announced, his voice filled with the awe he reserves for all television law-enforcement officers above the rank of patrolman. And sure enough, it was: Jack Lord himself, at least 20 years younger, disguised in a dark wig and fancy stockings, but still, unmistakably, Steve McGarrett, the head of 'Hawaii Five-O,' the scourge of the Honolulu underworld. Right away, my son's respect for Colonial Williamsburg doubled. He couldn't understand why there were no Orientals in the film.

Actually, my son recognized three people in 'The Story of a Patriot' – McGarrett by face, and Washington and Jefferson by name. My son had never seen or heard of Patrick Henry before, but the most outspoken of the Williamsburg revolutionaries quickly became his hero.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Tate interview with McCluney; Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 127.

⁹⁹ Curtis, 211.

¹⁰⁰ Dick Schaap, "Culture Shock: Williamsburg & Disney World, Back to Back" *New York Times* 28 Sept. 1975, 362.

It is clear, then, that while Lord's fame may not have entirely negated the film's ability to teach its viewers about colonial history, it undoubtedly changed the way they related to the main character. As time continues to go by and *Hawaii Five-O* becomes a distant memory, new generations may again be able to relate to Lord's character as an everyman rather than as a Hawaiian detective. This is, perhaps, a superficial example, but it makes clear the influence of historical circumstances on viewer response.¹⁰¹

Pedagogy of a *Patriot*: What Makes a “Good” History Film?

It seems quite evident, then, that changes over the course of the second half of the twentieth century have greatly influenced the degree of immersion experienced by *The Story of a Patriot*'s audiences. But is the loss of immersion really such a bad thing? For decades, historians and theorists including Natalie Zemon Davis, David Herlihy, John O'Connor, Robert Rosenstone, Robert Brent Toplin, and Hayden White have been questioning the role of film in teaching history and the best methods to pursue in using this medium to teach about the past. In general, the consensus among these scholars has been that full immersion of the audience in a history film is detrimental to the teaching of history; rather, a “good” film should clearly reveal the process of “making history,” acknowledge the multiple voices and perspectives implicit in any historical situation, raise questions in the viewer, and lead the audience on to other sources of information.

¹⁰¹ In an interesting aside, the *Story of a Patriot* Production Books include an article clipping from the November 23, 1970 issue of the Manchester, Connecticut *Herald* relating anecdotes from a recent Associated Press Managing Editors convention in Hawaii. “Jack Lord, who plays Steve McGarrett on Hawaii 5-0, was present with his wife” the article reports. “One editor told me he had complimented Jack Lord on his performance in the movie shown to visitors at Colonial Williamsburg. Jack was extremely pleased—said it was the first time anyone had mentioned it to him. Actually, he had played the role in the historical document before he became so well known.”

The distancing of the audience from the story, rather than their immersion within it, is often advocated as one of the most important factors in achieving this goal.

Theoretically, distancing is valued as a technique in creating history films because it allows the process of the history's construction to be recognized and analyzed. As Davis writes, "the historian wants first and foremost to let the past be the past, strange before it is familiar, particular before it is universal."¹⁰² One way of maintaining this "strangeness" and informing the audience about the origins of knowledge is to sensitize viewers to "historiographical debates" and refuse to let "our knowledge of the past appear too certain."¹⁰³ Too often, Herlihy argues, "in order to achieve the aesthetic effect on which the intellectual impact will normally depend," films force viewers to immerse themselves in the action and lose sight of the historiographic process.¹⁰⁴ In this view immersion is a dangerous principle; it is far more important for a viewer to understand the methods involved in the making of history than to feel that one is a part of the history being told. The filmmaker must be sure to remind "viewers of the distance between past and present" so that the audience can examine the past more critically and understand what has passed on an intellectual rather than a primarily emotional level.¹⁰⁵

As we have seen, *The Story of a Patriot* pursues the opposite effect, seeking to bring the audience into the story and creating a strong connection with the "everyman" protagonist. And, one could argue, the historian-critics are correct in suggesting that this immersion largely prevents a questioning of the scholarly history behind *The Story of a*

¹⁰² Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead': Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," *The Yale Review* 76.4 (1987): 460.

¹⁰³ Robert Brent Toplin, "The Filmmaker as Historian," *The American Historical Review* 93.5 (1988): 1220; David Herlihy, "Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Films and History," *The American Historical Review* 93.5 (1988): 1188.

¹⁰⁴ Herlihy, 1187.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, 479.

Patriot. The film does not show or credit the research that went into its scripting—though, in fact, several historical consultants worked on the movie and many lines were drawn directly from the words of the founding fathers—and the audience is not encouraged to question the truth of the general events taking place on screen.¹⁰⁶ We are told at the beginning that the film’s “principle figure, planter John Fry, is not found in any history book” but are immediately reassured that “the leaders he meets and the events he witnesses are drawn from the records of time.”¹⁰⁷ In all of these ways, *The Story of a Patriot* does seem to deny the audience a deeper knowledge of the complexity of history and discourages an active intellectual engagement with the process of making and understanding the past.

At the same time, however, there are instances in which the film offers multiple perspectives upon the past, which follows theorists’ suggestion that the history film should reveal the complexity of times gone by. For instance, the film does take care to present the struggles behind the American Revolution. John Fry is not a fervent revolutionary from start to finish: he expresses over the course of the film both loyalist and republican ideologies. He meets thoughtful men on both sides of the question, suggesting that there is more than one valid perspective on the issues examined in the film. In addition, the fact that the film has been running for nearly half a century has allowed for considerable shifts in historical knowledge, creating an audience which is increasingly likely to be aware of the flaws in *The Story of a Patriot*’s depiction of the past. While this may not have been intended by the film’s creators (after all, they had no

¹⁰⁶ Teute, 275: “News from Colonial Williamsburg,” 1. (One could, I suppose, count an inside joke in the film as “crediting” the researchers: in the scene where Fry is elected to the House of Burgesses, Thad Tate’s name is used for the other successful candidate.)

¹⁰⁷ *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot*, dir. George Seaton, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and Paramount Pictures, 1957, DVD.

intention of exhibiting the film beyond its first five to seven years), it does help to bring into question the methods utilized in creating the film and may indirectly introduce the audience to issues in the writing and authentication of history.

The fact that the film presents both sides of the question of American Independence suggests that it does in part succeed in meeting another requirement many theorists impose on the history film: an acknowledgement of the “multiplicity of viewpoints” from and about the past.¹⁰⁸ Such a film should concern itself with “suggesting the possibility that there may be a very different way of reporting what happened,” Davis argues.¹⁰⁹ *The Story of a Patriot*, as I have shown, does not seriously question its own “truth status,” and the viewer is encouraged to identify with John Fry and therefore to support his ultimate decision to vote for American independence. At the same time, however, the presence of respectable dissenting voices (especially in the persons of John’s friends and his deceased father) and the difficulty John has in making his choice do, to some extent, bring to the viewer’s attention the range of opinion and perspectives that existed at the time of the Revolution and which may exist today in scholarship about the war for Independence.

Another hurdle faced in considering *The Story of a Patriot* as a history film is scholar-critics’ arguments that such a work should be “footnoted” – it ought to lead the viewer to outside sources and allow audiences to understand upon what scholarship the authors based their presentation. The very feasibility of this is greatly debated, as some, including Herlihy, suggest that it is impossible to achieve without ruining “the aesthetic

¹⁰⁸ Rosenstone, 206.

¹⁰⁹ Davis, 476.

integrity of the work.”¹¹⁰ On the other hand, Hayden White, while not directly addressing the effect of footnoting techniques (such as on-screen disclaimers or scholars breaking in on the story to offer evidence) argues that a footnoted movie could technically be made: “There is no law prohibiting the production of a historical film of sufficient length” to “be ‘defend[ed]’ and ‘footnote[d],’ respond to objections, and ‘criticize the opposition.”¹¹¹ While “footnotes” in a film might be distracting, there are methods which could be used, either in the dialogue of the movie or through the credits, to lead the viewer on to other sources of information.

The Story of a Patriot does not overtly use any method of footnoting, and it does not in its text or dialogue suggest to the viewer further sources on the topic. However, the film has a unique advantage over most other historical films when seen in its namesake theaters: it is “referenced” by its context. The average viewer exits the film to board a bus taking him or her into the museum-city of Colonial Williamsburg, where many of the themes explored in the movie will be further explained and expanded upon by costumed interpreters (though the level and type of interpretation has varied over time). The audience of the film is able to physically interact with the “set” as they explore the locations in John Fry’s world themselves (at one point Colonial Williamsburg even developed a map of the town based on the film), and museum workers are available throughout the city to act as living “footnotes” answering any questions viewers might have.¹¹² An example of this can be found in the work of Richard Handler and Eric Gable, as they recount a scene in Wetherburn’s Tavern of Colonial Williamsburg where an

¹¹⁰ Herlihy, 1189.

¹¹¹ Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *The American Historical Review* 93.5 (1988): 1196. White is quoting the objections of Ian Jarvie.

¹¹² Alexander to Seaton, 21 March 1961, *The Story of a Patriot* Production Books 3.12, Media Productions Archive, Colonial Williamsburg, 1.

interpreter explained a few of the flaws in *The Story of a Patriot* including the minor details that “the slaves in church are on the wrong side of the balcony and that a gentleman appears in public without a wig.”¹¹³ If further enlightenment is desired, Colonial Williamsburg can provide the resources of the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library to the interested researcher.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that this “footnoting by context” does not bear the same level of reliability or accountability that traditional written referencing provides. In a work of written history, the footnotes lead to primary sources and secondary works of scholarly research that have been reviewed by experts before publication. Williamsburg’s interpreters, on the other hand, are rarely professional historians in the traditional sense of the term. While they may be well trained in their subjects, they cannot always provide documentation for their responses on the spot, and they may well face questions for which they have no answer—or, worse, they may through innocent ignorance provide incorrect answers to visitor questions. In addition, one must remember that Colonial Williamsburg has changed the focus of its interpretation a number of times over the course of its existence, acknowledging not simply the ever-changing state of historical knowledge but the changing social context which shapes the particular needs and desires of the city’s tourists. All of these factors render the context of Colonial Williamsburg a less than completely reliable “footnote” for the film.

The history of the distribution of *The Story of a Patriot* does, however, show that further efforts were indeed made to lead viewers on to other sources on the subject. As the film made its way into classrooms and clubs, it lost its “footnoting-by-context” but

¹¹³ Handler and Gable, 79.

gained a written reference. Colonial Williamsburg produced a teachers' manual to accompany it, a guide providing "basic curriculum material for courses in American history in grades 8 through 12; also suitable for American government, civics, social studies, senior problems courses, and the like; excellent enrichment material for courses in social and cultural history, architectural design, costume design, and many related subjects."¹¹⁴ This brochure gave helpful hints on how to make the film most meaningful to an audience (advising, for instance, that as "the film assumes some acquaintance with pre-Revolutionary places, events, and people, such knowledge should be assured before younger groups see the picture"), offered suggestions for supplemental reading, and proposed activities and discussion questions which would require both further study (as participants researched the biographies of famous patriots, enquired into colonial transportation, etc.) and fostered critical thinking (through debates on the Virginia Resolution for American Independence or the importance of the militia and through questions on the connections between struggles over political freedom in the 18th century and those in the viewer's own time).¹¹⁵ This could certainly be a very effective way of footnoting the film, though the manual's limited distribution and use by only a select group (leaders of outside organizations screening the film) necessarily restricts its overall value.

However, in promoting outside research and critical thought, the teachers' manual is important not only as a footnote but as a consideration in another factor important in the creation of a "good" history film – the ability of the film to raise questions in the audience about the era under discussion, prompting reflection on what they have seen and

¹¹⁴ *Teachers Manual for Williamsburg The Story of a Patriot, The Story of a Patriot Production* Books 3.12. Media Productions Archive. Colonial Williamsburg. 1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4, 7-10.

challenging them to continue thinking after they've left the theater.¹¹⁶ Naturally, this particular criterion may depend as much upon the audience as upon the film: if a viewer is already a critical thinker, he or she is more likely to ponder and analyze what he or she has seen. However, the structure of *The Story of a Patriot* is certainly developed in a way that creates ample room for questioning. For instance, Robert Rosenstone suggests that the way to bring complexity to the history film is by "making films that refuse to provide a satisfying, linear story with a good emotional release at the end. . . . One might have a narration that does not attempt omniscience, but which raises questions, even calls itself into question. Or asks you to question it."¹¹⁷ While *The Story of a Patriot* does not overtly call itself into question, and is undoubtedly linear, it does not provide a satisfying emotional release at the end for all viewers. Yes, there is the thrill of pride and patriotism at the close as John chooses to be an American. But many important questions are left unresolved which can leave the viewer asking "what happens next?" Certainly, one must assume that the average viewer knows that the Americans win in their war for independence. But the fact that the film is structured around fictional characters, whose existence cannot be previously known and whose "futures" cannot be posited, means that cutting off the film at this particular point leaves many elements in the plot frustratingly unresolved. As the movie ends, John's son has just joined the militia to fight for American independence. Will he survive the war? Will he see his father again? Leaving these questions unanswered may lead the viewer to a curiosity about the lives of American soldiers in the Revolution and the casualties suffered in the war. John Fry, as

¹¹⁶ Rosenstone, 27, 220; John E. O'Connor, "History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past" *The American Historical Review* 93.5 (1988): 1207.

¹¹⁷ Rosenstone, 118.

he himself acknowledges, has put the security of his family's fortune at risk. Will he face reprisals from the British? This brings into question the response that the British actually made to the American declaration of war. Did the British invade Virginia? Did Patriots like John Fry face reprisals during the war? Were many fortunes lost?¹¹⁸ Viewers also know as the film ends that John has made a decision which will greatly displease his mother, who has been shown throughout as a firm Loyalist. This brings into focus questions about American Tories and wartime divisions within families more often considered in a Civil War context. In all of these ways, *The Story of a Patriot* can be seen as the sort of film Rosenstone advocates, raising as many questions in the critical viewer as it provides answers. The film does, indeed, have the potential to lead the audience to seek out further information on the topic it explores.

Modern Audiences and the *Patriot*

Perhaps the most important question that can be asked of this film as a "history film," though, is whether people *are* learning from it. This is a very difficult issue to address, as no formal study has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of the film. Colonial Williamsburg has not, apparently, performed any surveys specifically dealing with this issue, though according to Colonial Williamsburg Vice President Richard McCluney (an admitted partisan of the film) a study done in the mid-1990s on the effectiveness of the general educational curriculum then being used at Williamsburg showed that visitors who viewed the film were much more likely to grasp the overall

¹¹⁸ In merely one example, Colonial Williamsburg might well choose to connect this aspect of the story to the tale of Thomas Nelson, Jr., of nearby Yorktown, and the financial consequences of his own devotion to the American cause.

themes promoted by the museum at that time than were those who skipped it.¹¹⁹ There is no known repository of viewer responses, and, of course, as O'Connor has pointed out, audiences can be unpredictable and may be active agents in shaping their viewing experience, making generalizations difficult.¹²⁰ However, by looking at the limited samples provided by news articles on the film, letters to newspaper editors about the film (especially beginning in the 1990s as a part of the fervent debates surrounding the film's restoration), and through newer internet film review sites such as Amazon.com and the Internet Movie Database, one can begin at least a superficial examination of the film's effectiveness.¹²¹

An exploration of the responses expressed online and in editorials reveals that many people are interacting with *The Story of a Patriot* along the very axes emphasized by historian-critics. The immersive aspect of the film—a controversial issue in terms of film theory—is often mentioned in audience responses, and many viewers clearly value this feature of the movie. Catherine Short, for example, argued in 1993 that with “the special design of the screen, the sound, and the projectors, the Visitor Center remains the best place to see ‘The Patriot.’ Some would say it is the only place to see it effectively.”¹²² The Visitor Center setting is especially important to Short because of the immersion it promotes. As *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther noted back in 1957 at the film's premier, the illusion promoted by the special theater “achieved the first step upon the ‘bridge of understanding . . . into the past’ of which Mr. Rockefeller spoke

¹¹⁹ Richard McCluney, personal communication with author, 1 February 2006. Unfortunately I have not been able to trace these statistics.

¹²⁰ O'Connor, 1205.

¹²¹ My examination here will not focus on change over time, as I have already touched on this in the section of this thesis dealing with the effects of historical change on the presentation of the film.

¹²² Catherine Y. Short, “‘Patriot’ Should Stay Put” *Virginia Gazette* 8 Sept. 1993: 5A.

[earlier that evening].”¹²³ One aspect of this immersion that is often referenced is the emotional connection it provides; time after time anecdotes refer to the tears it brings to the audience’s eyes.¹²⁴ This may be in accord with Davis’s argument that an effective history film can bring the viewer to understand the perspective of historical figures, or it may simply be an example of the “emotional release” Rosenstone suggests is a feature of conventional, ineffective films; in any case, it suggests that immersion *may* be a useful device for some viewers in teaching history.¹²⁵

The comments found in newspaper editorials and online also reveal insights into the level of critical thought audiences apply to the film. Some viewers are clearly willing to accept the film as a model, however imperfect, of historic accuracy, declaring it, for instance, to be much more truthful than Mel Gibson’s *The Patriot*.¹²⁶ Other viewers are openly critical of the film’s historicity, pointing out its omission of women’s and black history and its failure to live up to modern standards of scholarship as it is “not a historically accurate reflection of 18th Century life.”¹²⁷ Thus, even this very limited and self-selected sample reveals that audiences are clearly interacting with the film in some of the arenas which critic-historians deem important for the understanding of history on film.¹²⁸

¹²³ Crowther, 22.

¹²⁴ For examples of emotional reactions to the film, see Jamie Ross Fahs, “Keep film at home” *Virginia Gazette* 18 Sept. 1993, sec. A: 7; Bentley Boyd, “Visitors get new picture of CW” *Daily Press* 5 Sept. 1993, sec. C: 1; vznevada54, “This is a wonderful and moving movie...that everyone should see” *Internet Movie Database*, 7 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049956/usercomments>>; Montgomery, 62.

¹²⁵ Toplin, 1213; Rosenstone, 118.

¹²⁶ J. Arena, “Inspirational!” *Amazon.com* 7 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.amazon.com>>.

¹²⁷ Boyd, C7; Michael W. Miller, “A Glorified Period Piece, but...” *Amazon.com* 7 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.amazon.com>>.

¹²⁸ It has been suggested that I conduct an audience survey at the visitor center myself. This would doubtless be of considerable value if done professionally, but I have not pursued this option because of my own lack of training and resources. To be truly representative, such a survey would have to be well and carefully planned, and responses would have to be gathered over an extended period of time to assure a

The perceived effectiveness of *The Story of a Patriot* in teaching history may also be estimated by considering Colonial Williamsburg's continued use of the film. When it was first created, Colonial Williamsburg's planners assumed that *The Story of a Patriot* would only be used for about five to seven years, but the movie's run is now approaching five decades. Such longevity has not been assured without continuing investment in the film. While the idea of replacing *The Story of a Patriot* was addressed again and again, Colonial Williamsburg chose to persist in endorsing the 1957 production, continuing to buy "new" prints. By the early 1990s, however, the film's technical quality had deteriorated to a point at which a decision had to be made between a costly restoration or a costly remake. After considerable debate, it was decided that the film would be restored. The original restoration was completed in May of 1994, but this process simply produced a new film print, which would only extend the life of the movie by another five to ten years. Soon afterwards yet another restoration began, as The Film Preserve undertook the digital restoration of the film and upgrading of the Patriot Theaters, a project costing around \$2.5 million.¹²⁹ This is, granted, less than the estimated \$12 million it would have cost to create a new movie of comparable quality, but it was still a significant investment in maintaining *The Story of a Patriot*. This decision to restore *The Story of a Patriot* – a choice made not once but twice – makes clear the fact that the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation still believes this film to be of value in introducing visitors to the museum-city and in teaching about colonial history. However, the restoration was not an uncontroversial choice, and the debates surrounding this move

fair sampling of visitors. I lack the knowledge, training, and resources to conduct such a study, though the results of such work would certainly offer important data. Perhaps a future researcher might choose to pursue this route.

¹²⁹ Montgomery, 69; McCluney, 38.

affirm both the passions this movie arouses and reveal ways in which contemporary audiences are reacting to the film.

Within Colonial Williamsburg itself the restoration raised issues about the way to address history on film and the flaws of *The Story of a Patriot*. Some clearly continued to feel that the movie was still of great value to its audiences. For instance, in a press release of 2002, Colonial Williamsburg President Colin Campbell was quoted attributing the wide geographical range of donors to the film's restoration as "an important statement of the film's significance, and Colonial Williamsburg's far-reaching impact."¹³⁰

However, the film also had longstanding opponents, including Vice President of Research Cary Carson. Carson argued not that the film's scholarship or technique was fatally flawed but that the film was simply no longer relevant to Colonial Williamsburg's educational program. *The Story of a Patriot* was created in an era in which political history was an important focus; after social history interpretations came to the forefront in the late 1970s, Carson urged, the film no longer effectively communicated to audiences the sort of background they needed for what they would see in the historic area.¹³¹ As chair of the Curriculum Committee, Carson had urged as early as 1977 that "One thing is undeniable. *The Patriot*, which has served so ably for twenty-one years, is no longer an adequate introduction even to the social and economic themes we interpret in Williamsburg today. While we can be grateful that this American film classic wears well enough to use in the meantime. . . . [i]t is simply inconceivable that even five years from now America's premier history museum could still be showing an orientation film

¹³⁰ Press Release, 20 September 2002, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library "The Story of a Patriot" file, Williamsburg, VA, 1.

¹³¹ Cary Carson, personal communication with author, 11 September 2006; Curriculum Committee, *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg: A Plan of Education* (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1977), 2-5.

older than *Ben Hur*.”¹³² Nor was Carson alone in his opposition to the continued exhibition of the film. Visitor Center manager Rob Weir, for instance, argued in 1993 that “People don’t come to Colonial Williamsburg to spend an hour in the Visitors Center,” urging instead that “[w]e should have an exciting, effective 10-minute program in both theatres so the visitor’s basic needs are met.”¹³³ Thus this battle was waged for several decades between Colonial Williamsburg administrators.

The restoration debates also reveal the intensity of feeling that *The Story of a Patriot* continues to arouse in visitors. As the film was threatened by calls for replacement rather than restoration, a number of locals spoke out in the local *Virginia Gazette* in defense of the *Patriot*. Catherine Short, for instance, endorsed the film’s continuing power to move audience members, writing of a “house party” she hosted “that included a nationally known landscape architect, a former college professor turned silversmith, a former clergyman turned sculptor, a botanist, and a Wall Street broker. Not having seen ‘The Patriot’ for a number of years, they wanted to see it again. We did so, and all were once again entranced. Applause from the audience followed the final scene.”¹³⁴ Similarly, Jamie Fahs wrote a letter to the paper’s editor asserting that “This film will always be one of the best tools to introduce CW, what it stands for and its place in history.” Making clear the powerful emotional impact the film is able, in this view, to convey even in its later years, Fahs went on to explain that “whenever I have new visitors, my first stop for them, after they’ve gotten their tickets, is to view ‘The Story of a Patriot.’ No matter how many times I have seen it,” Fahs wrote, “I am always moved at

¹³² Curriculum Committee, 18. If only he knew.

¹³³ Boyd, C7. Nevertheless, Carson and his allies were overruled, which Carson attributes to the fact that *The Story of a Patriot* “never lost its very own fan club,” especially among influential donors in the Raleigh Tavern Society. Cary Carson, personal communication with author, 11 September 2006.

¹³⁴ Short, 5A.

the scene on the porch of the Raleigh Tavern. Lord Fairfax says he is going home and asks, ‘What about you, John?’ John Fry answers, ‘I am home.’ The tears never fail to flow, but perhaps that is because I have lived a long time and this is my country. I am home.”¹³⁵

This emotional attachment to the film can also be seen in even more recent responses: online reviews not necessarily prompted by the need to defend and preserve the film. For instance, a search of the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) reveals descriptions of *The Story of a Patriot* as “a very moving story” which will “bring tears to your eyes. . . tears of joy,” while viewer John Reid lauds the film on Amazon.com as “a great film,” describing how he is “still moved in the final scene when the title character must decide whether to risk his family fortune, his legacy, his land and most importantly the life of his newly signed up soldier-son in order to create a new land based on freedom from tyranny.”¹³⁶ Even while acknowledging the film’s faults (it “does not overtly condemn some of the social issues of the era . . . which may bother the socially conscious,” with slavery “depicted but in a very sanitized way”) this viewer was sufficiently affected by the film to voice his opinion online about its emotional impact and its usefulness in showing why Williamsburg “is an important tourist attraction and how much was riding on the decisions of our ancestors.”¹³⁷ This is not to say that all audience members who express their opinions online favor the film; on the contrary, at times they voice passionate detractions. One reviewer on Amazon.com states flatly that the “acting is horrible!”, while a user on IMDb argues that the film’s “50s cinematic style

¹³⁵ Fahs. 7A.

¹³⁶ vznevada54, “This is a wonderful and moving movie...that everyone should see” *Internet Movie Database*, 7 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049956/usercomments>>; John Reid, “The Living Town of Williamsburg and Freedom’s Tough Choices” *Amazon.com* 7 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.amazon.com>>.

¹³⁷ Reid.

is a little difficult to take. . . . I'd love to see an updated version where it isn't presented quite so piously."¹³⁸ These and the other comments found on such internet reviews are, of course, only a very small and self-selected sample of the film's fans and critics. However, the fact that *The Story of a Patriot* has evoked such passionate responses does indicate that the movie is clearly capable of strongly impacting modern audiences and capturing the attention (whether positive or negative) of Williamsburg's visitors.

At the same time, though, these viewer responses are a very limited sample, and it was not a few internet reviews that convinced Colonial Williamsburg to invest millions of dollars into the film. Here again, nearly five decades after the movie's inception, we see the influence of culturally conservative powers in shaping the life of this film.¹³⁹ As early as the 1970s, *The Story of a Patriot* was being propped up by nostalgic and wealthy donors, as *Readers Digest* founder DeWitt Wallace offered to build the movie a new theater complex when the proposed use of other orientation films threatened the *Patriot* with expulsion.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, in the recent restorations of the film, Carson suggests, it was Colonial Williamsburg's most significant donors, members of the Raleigh Tavern Society, who were leaders in the fight to preserve the *Patriot*.¹⁴¹ Thus, for better or for worse, in modern times this film apparently appeals especially to the nostalgic among Colonial Williamsburg's fans, both underlining just how much it is a product of the past

¹³⁸ Grianan, "Patriot – dated but still works." *Internet Movie Database*. 7 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049956/usercomments>>; Anne H. Barker, "LOVE Williamsburg, Hate the Movie" *Amazon.com* 7 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.amazon.com>>.

¹³⁹ My use of the term "conservative" is not meant to indicate political affiliation but to express a traditionalist and nostalgic point of view.

¹⁴⁰ Brian Whitson, "Rebirth of a Patriot: Storied CW film getting restored." *Daily Press*, 4 October 2002. <http://www.dailypress.com/news/local/williamsburg/dp-71286sy0oct04.story>. (Accessed 10 October 2002); Philip Kopper, *Colonial Williamsburg*, Revised edition, (New York: Abrams, 2001), 235.

¹⁴¹ Cary Carson, personal communication with author, 11 September 2006.

and at the same time evidencing the strong emotional effect its immersive techniques can still successfully evoke.

A 21st Century *Patriot*

The current use of *The Story of a Patriot* by Colonial Williamsburg suggests that at least some key Colonial Williamsburg officials also believe that the film is still useful in rousing and educating audiences. In one recent example, the film was part of a fund-raising campaign. A mailing was sent out to potential donors with a free DVD of *The Story of a Patriot* as a focal piece. Framed by an envelope which folds open to a shape vaguely reminiscent of a theater, the mailing uses the plot and themes of *The Story of a Patriot* to appeal to the founding myths of America, to connect those myths to Colonial Williamsburg, and to use that connection to solicit financial support. On the mail-in form, donors are encouraged to check a box affirming that

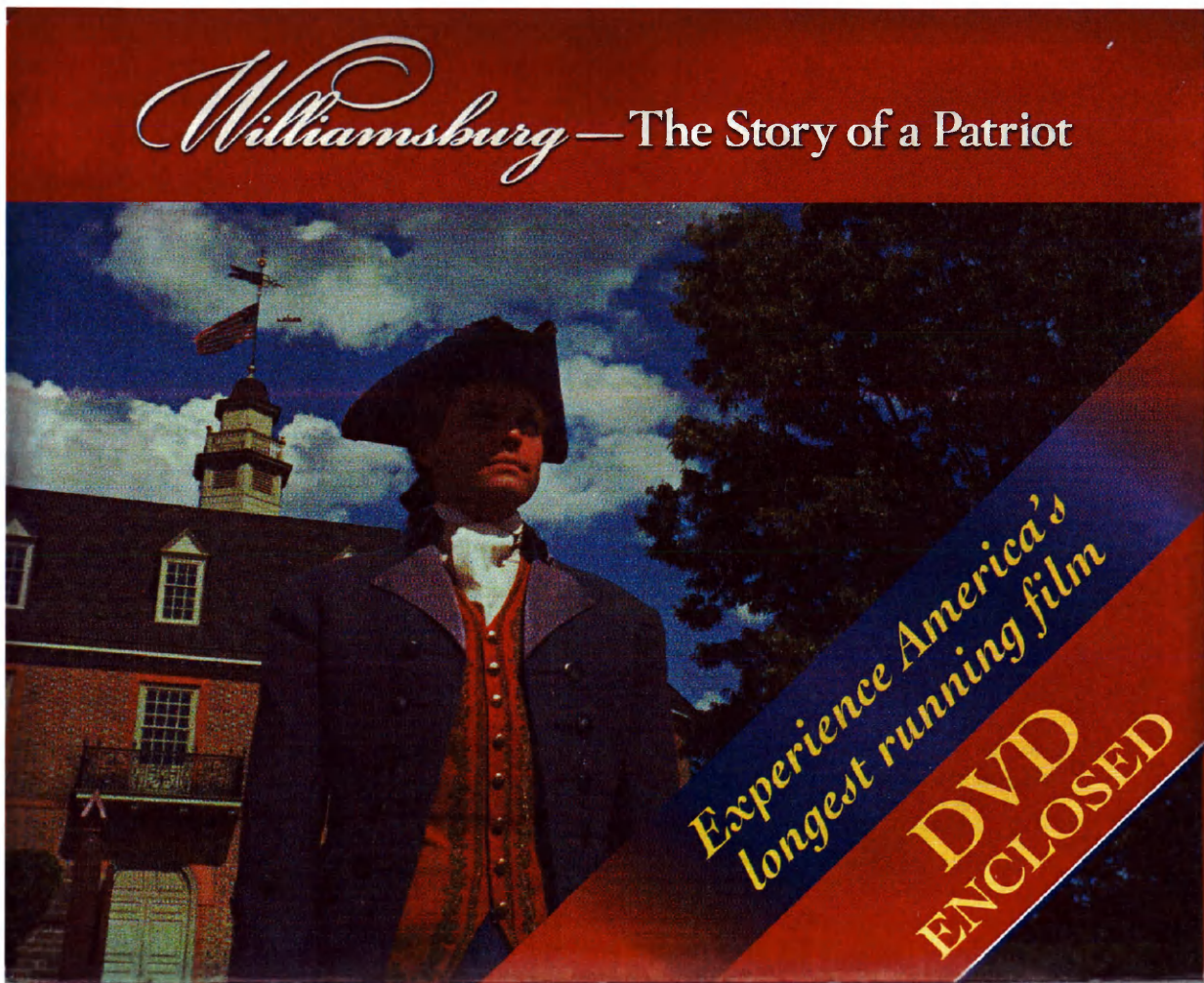
America's founding, as told through the story of John Fry and in the restored grounds and buildings of Colonial Williamsburg – illustrates a timeless lesson: That each of us must do whatever we can to strengthen our nation and preserve our freedom. I know this is the essence of Colonial Williamsburg's education for citizenship – and I want to help you bring history to life for people of all ages, from all backgrounds and from around the world. . . so we can encourage them to become active, engaged citizens who are shaping the world around them.¹⁴²

By using *The Story of a Patriot* as a vital part of this appeal, Colonial Williamsburg officials are clearly expressing a faith in the power of this film to captivate audiences (especially those with a particular affection for the *Patriot* and the deep pockets to support it). However, in positioning the film as a primary symbol of Colonial

¹⁴² Advertising mailing, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, July 2006.

Figure 6

Image of the recent fundraising mailing featuring a DVD of *The Story of a Patriot*



One of the most recent uses of *The Story of a Patriot* is as a fundraising tool. Mailed out along with a packet requesting donations, this use of the film expresses Colonial Williamsburg's continued belief in the film's value and its ability to connect with audiences; it also evidences the presumed link between affection for the film and an ability to donate to the Foundation. More speculatively one could assert that this use of the movie—as a DVD and as an example of the modern-day film restorer's art—is a revival of *The Story of a Patriot's* being highlighted as a cutting-edge technological achievement; practically, it can be seen as a way for Colonial Williamsburg to put their financial investment in the film to greater use.

Williamsburg and its goals, they also affirm a belief in its ability to express something essential about the nature of the Foundation's current endeavors.

A similar link between the movie and Colonial Williamsburg's current efforts can be found in the newly developed "Revolutionary City" program, evidencing the continuing importance of *The Story of a Patriot* and the educational techniques used within that film. As he planned for the opening of the new program, Historic Area Vice President Rex Ellis set forth his "hopes [that] scenes in the revolutionary city resemble scenes in 'The Story of a Patriot,' 'If you remember "The Story of a Patriot," and if you remember John Fry . . . coming into the town of Williamsburg, there were callers, kids running around, animals, wagons being loaded and unloaded, people in the middle of the street talking,' Ellis said." That immersive experience, so important to the film, is the "kind of experience that we want [in Revolutionary City]," he continued. "We don't want the guests to just watch what's going on. We want them to be immersed. We want activity to be happening around them, conversations taking place with them, asking them "What do you think about this?" in some way trying to involve them in the experience. That's what our research tells us our guests want."¹⁴³ It is clear then that (as one might expect at a living-history museum) even today Colonial Williamsburg greatly values immersion as a technique for teaching history.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Bill Tolbert, "Partial closure eyed for Historic Area" *Virginia Gazette* 2 Nov. 2005, online edition 18 Nov. 2005 <www.vagazette.com/news/va-news2_110202nov02,1,5547520,print.story>. Richard McCluney has also explicitly compared "Day One" of the Revolutionary City program to *The Story of a Patriot*. Richard McCluney, personal communication with author, 3 August 2006.

¹⁴⁴ This "real-life" immersion is, naturally, a very different thing from immersion in film. While watching actors physically using the buildings of Colonial Williamsburg's historic district can bring the museum-city to life in a much more visceral way than can be achieved on screen in a film, especially in one which has become as visibly dated as *The Story of a Patriot*. At the same time, though, film has at least the potential to be *more* accurate than these live reenactments. Because of the ability to edit and utilize film technology, movies can take viewers into a wider range of activities and locales, while physical reenactments within the historic district are naturally limited by space, time, safety, and the practical

Possibilities for a Future *Patriot*

Colonial Williamsburg apparently continues to recognize that trait in *The Story of a Patriot*, as the film survived the restoration debates of the eighties and nineties and continues to be exhibited as it nears its fiftieth anniversary. While McCluney has suggested that a “successor” or “sequel” film will be made at some point—most likely a shorter picture providing more background on the facts of Williamsburg’s colonial history—one might well recall that similar claims have been made throughout the *Patriot*’s lifespan.¹⁴⁵ This film, meant to last only a few years, has from time to time been supplemented with other short introductory films (as, for instance, the orientation film for the bicentennial and a short, 10-minute piece in the mid-1990s) but none of these “replacements” has earned the respect or had the staying power of the 1957 production. And, as McCluney has noted, even if *The Story of a Patriot* were taken out of its regular daily schedule, Colonial Williamsburg would most likely retain use of the film for limited daytime showings and special night programs.¹⁴⁶ It is evident, then, that despite its faults, both audiences and many officials at Colonial Williamsburg still believe *The Story of a Patriot* to be a useful and effective tool for teaching history.¹⁴⁷

However, as there *are* many faults which must be acknowledged in this film, one might finally ask what Colonial Williamsburg could have done differently to improve *The Story of a Patriot* as a teaching aid and visitor orientation. One option would have

logistics of performing for a crowd. This comparison between the respective merits of immersion through film and immersion through live reenactment deserves attention, and could well be a study of its own.

¹⁴⁵ Richard McCluney, personal communication with author, 1 February 2006 and 3 August 2006.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ One might add here that Carson, one of the *Patriot*’s leading detractors for several decades, acknowledges that under the themes prompted by the new Revolutionary City program, the film has regained a degree of relevance which he feels was missing for many years—however temporary that relevance may prove to be. Cary Carson, personal communication with author, 11 September 2006.

been to create a strict documentary rather than a dramatic fiction. However, as many scholars have pointed out, documentaries carry many pitfalls of their own. Perhaps the most important of these is the documentary's illusion of objectivity. Regarded as non-fictional works, documentaries have an air of scholarly authority, often supported through "the voice of a formal interpreter whose confident narration suggests that all the facts are knowable and their meaning understandable."¹⁴⁸ However, this objectivity is often an illusion, as documentaries are inevitably shaped by the prejudices of their creators. As Erik Barnouw has noted, "The documentarist makes endless choices. He selects topics, people, vistas, angles, lenses, juxtapositions, sounds, words. Each selection is an expression of his point of view, whether he is aware of it or not, whether he acknowledges it or not."¹⁴⁹ Documentaries also share many of the flaws of the dramatic film because they are forced to shape history into narratives, highlighting some stories and suppressing others.¹⁵⁰ The ultimate, and dangerous, effect of this, according to Rosenstone, is that documentaries may "deliver the past in a highly developed, polished form that serves to suppress rather than raise questions" just as surely as other films do, but without raising audience suspicions.¹⁵¹

If, then, the documentary is not a completely reliable means of teaching history, could one create a more accurate or less biased form of dramatic film? Any work of fiction is sure to fall into some of the traps elucidated by the historian-critics of history films. But the history of *The Story of a Patriot* itself shows that a more "historically responsible" fiction film might have been made. As I have already noted, the original

¹⁴⁸ Toplin, 1216.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Toplin, 1214.

¹⁵⁰ Rosenstone, 33.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

treatment for the film written by James Agee, while an influence on certain elements in the final production, differed drastically from *The Story of a Patriot* and would have offered a much more multifaceted view of history than audiences are presented in the official version. Agee was intent upon providing a wide range of opinions about the Revolution rather than focusing strictly upon one character.¹⁵² “The effort,” Agee explained, “is to present a number of characters, each meaning a good deal within one’s sense of the economy and society of the time and the emergent history, who shall be interesting chiefly because they are what they are and because, as we watch them, we begin to understand what they are, why they are, and what within a few years they are bound to become.”¹⁵³ Providing a broad range of characters from varying economic classes and political viewpoints, Agee emphasized that “within the shape of our story there can be no real ‘villain’”; rather, the multiplicity of opinion that existed at the time ought to be represented.¹⁵⁴ This treatment might well have come nearer to many historians’ ideal of the history film than does the more limited expression of historical viewpoints found in *The Story of a Patriot*.

Agee’s treatment would also have offered a perspective on Colonial Williamsburg that is more in keeping with modern scholarship. In *The Story of a Patriot*, slavery is really only explicitly depicted in the opening shots, and even there the hardest labor the slaves seem to face is the splitting of a few logs. Agee, on the other hand, urged a special emphasis on the shadow slavery cast over the land in the Revolutionary era.¹⁵⁵ He wished to show the interactions between house slaves, field slaves, and their masters, and

¹⁵² Goodbody, “Treatment for New Information Center Film.” 1.

¹⁵³ Agee, 3.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

to depict the ways in which white men of different social classes interacted with blacks. Agee was also interested in pointing out the existence of indigenous cultures, which are completely ignored in *The Story of a Patriot*.¹⁵⁶ None of this is to say that Agee's treatment would have rendered the perfect history film; even if his manuscript had been a finished product it would still have been an immersive fiction—indeed, Agee was intent on *not* “impair[ing] or destroy[ing] the illusion of the present, and of participation” in his script.¹⁵⁷ However, even in its early stages it shows paths untaken which might have yielded a more historically “acceptable” and educationally useful film.

Such paths might well be pursued by producers at Colonial Williamsburg should they create a successor to *The Story of a Patriot* in the current scholarly and political atmosphere. Indeed, as early as 1982 Thad Tate commented in an article on the film that there “is little doubt that a film made for the same purpose today would either deal with more ordinary, probably fictional, eighteenth-century Virginians—not unlike the amazingly prescient Agee treatment—or would almost certainly be somewhat more introspective and filmed in a smaller setting.”¹⁵⁸ Whether such a new film, perhaps on the model of shorter films being shown at other historic sites such as Jamestown and Yorktown, would be better or simply “different” must, of course, remain an intellectual question until (and perhaps even after) such a piece is created.¹⁵⁹ One might note, however, that many orientation films (and many proposals for replacement films at Colonial Williamsburg) are even shorter than *The Story of a Patriot*. This must

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5, 15.

¹⁵⁸ Thad Tate, “Behind The Story of a Patriot” *Colonial Williamsburg Today* 4.2 (Winter 1982).

18.

¹⁵⁹ While a comparative study of *The Story of a Patriot* and other works in the museum orientation film genre would doubtless be revealing, constraints of time and length prevent me from pursuing that subject here.

inevitably run up against the problem so often bemoaned by critics of the history film that the cinema forces a compression of history into a few brief narratives and that alternate viewpoints are not given ample attention. *The Story of a Patriot* itself has been accused of utilizing a “compression [that] leads to a superficial treatment of the causes of the Revolution.”¹⁶⁰ How much more superficial would an even shorter dramatic work be?

Yet another option Colonial Williamsburg filmmakers could have utilized is the strict orientation film. In such a work, filmmakers might simply state a few facts about the history of the area and then explain the facilities of the town and the sites which can be seen. This model was used before the completion of *The Story of a Patriot* and variations of it have been utilized in conjunction with the *Patriot* throughout the film’s history. Indeed, the value of such an orientation to visitors was, as Arthur Smith asserted, the inspiration for the creation of *The Story of a Patriot*.¹⁶¹ However, this sort of film must necessarily be focused on practical tourist information, and since it has relatively little time to teach history, it is not an improvement as a true “history film.” Furthermore, as Rosenstone has written, films interested only in facts tend to be “visually and dramatically inert, better as aids to sleep than to the acquisition of historical consciousness”—hardly the ideal medium for engaging the average tourist!¹⁶²

One final model open to the filmmakers at Colonial Williamsburg would be the postmodern style of film advocated by Rosenstone. Using such techniques as montage, reflexivity, non-linearity, contradiction, anachronism, and irreverence, filmmakers could have *attempted* to fulfill all of the requirements of the historian-critic in creating a film

¹⁶⁰ Curtis. 212.

¹⁶¹ Smith, np.

¹⁶² Rosenstone. 7.

about Colonial Williamsburg's history.¹⁶³ However, for the purposes of a visitor center film this would have been highly impractical. While such an unconventional format *might* be useful in raising historical consciousness, it is unlikely to win the heart of the casual tourist looking for a little background on the sites to be visited. As Rosenstone himself acknowledges, "Avant-garde historical films will not interest many people: hence [they] cannot possibly solve crises of cultural communication."¹⁶⁴ It doesn't matter how "good" a film one makes if no one sees it or understands it.

All of these suggestions, however, are really irrelevant, as Colonial Williamsburg *did* make *The Story of a Patriot* and as it intends to continue using it for the foreseeable future. What, then, could be done to make *The Story of a Patriot*, as it exists now, a better history film? In the context of its exhibition at Colonial Williamsburg's Patriot Theaters, greater attention could be paid to the film by interpreters. If the Foundation is interested in improving the film's ability to teach history, an effort could be made to better "footnote" the movie through interpretive sessions, printed supplementary guides, or the presence of a well-informed usher available before and after shows to actively provoke critical thought about the film and answer questions.¹⁶⁵ A greater effort could be made to actively point out the film's flaws and its virtues, making audiences more aware of the historical issues surrounding the film's creation and continued exhibition. Efforts could be made to improve audience awareness of the film's status as a historical artifact in and of itself, and what the implications of that status are. Indeed, the film could be used to teach about the history of Colonial Williamsburg as a museum and the

¹⁶³ Rosenstone, 206-7.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁶⁵ There are ushers at current showings of the film in the Patriot Theaters, but they take little active role in explaining the film to viewers.

importance of historic preservation rather than simply using the film to teach the history of Williamsburg's colonial days.

There are also ways in which home viewing of *The Story of a Patriot* could be supplemented. Colonial Williamsburg currently sells DVDs of the movie in many of its gift shops, and the DVD does include a special feature on the making of the film as well as a promotional piece on visiting Colonial Williamsburg.¹⁶⁶ The special feature is certainly of value, but the DVD format offers a wonderful opportunity to include a much broader range of informational features and documentaries. Considerably more could be added about the historiographical debates surrounding the film, or, if Colonial Williamsburg did not wish to invest the time and money into producing such supplements, the DVD could suggest sources for further research by the viewer. Use could also be made of the internet, as has been done with many PBS history films, to allow audiences to interact with the material available and promote questioning, critical thought, and further exploration of the topics covered in the film. Indeed, in some ways the teaching guide presented with the old 16mm school editions of the film was more intent on spurring the viewer on to greater thought than the modern, high-tech DVD is; this is one realm in which *The Story of a Patriot* cries out for attention.

Nonetheless, the very fact that so many uses and supplements can be suggested points to the complexity and importance of this remarkable film. Is *The Story of a Patriot* a perfect history film? Of course not. It is very much a product of 1950s scholarship, ideology, and technology, with all the flaws that such a parentage entails. At the same time, though, these failings can be revealing; its very weaknesses in teaching

¹⁶⁶ These same features are included on the DVD sent out with the financial appeal discussed earlier.

about Revolutionary history are strengths in its ability to teach us about the mid-twentieth century and the issues that dominated Cold War America. Does this clear aging make *The Story of a Patriot* a “dead” and dated film? No. Paradoxically, the very datedness of the film adds to its dynamism, as new generations have brought new expectations and ideologies to their viewing of the film and as changes in exhibition space, technology, and social circumstances dictated by shifts in cultural hegemony have fundamentally altered the way the film *works*. An examination of these changes helps us begin to explore how the passage of time affects viewers’ relationship to films, as well as offering a valuable example of how notions about teaching history through film have changed and how the practice can evolve into the future. And as the teaching of history does evolve into the twenty-first century, the history film will surely become ever more important—a field further developing within Colonial Williamsburg itself through their current “electronic field trip” program. *The Story of a Patriot* offers a practical model against which theories of the “proper” history film can be tested, and while theorists may never agree upon the necessary components of a history film, this particular movie demonstrates both the effectiveness and the flaws of immersive techniques. While it will never be perfect, *The Story of a Patriot* is an especially interesting history film not simply in the ways in which it teaches now but in the way its ever-changing physical and social context may affect the manner in which it teaches in the future. *The Story of a Patriot* is, has been, and will continue to be valuable as a history film, historic artifact, and a site for hegemonic struggle – a truly “Revolutionary” work.

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¹⁶⁷ The production books for *The Story of a Patriot* are divided into three volumes, each with a number of sectional dividers. However, the individual documents (including letters, memos, press clippings, etc) are not identified or given any sort of cataloguing number. Within my footnotes I have referred to each document by its volume and section within the books and also by the internal page numbering of the individual document.

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